クズと金貨のクオリディア
くずときんかのくおりでぃあ
QUALIDEA OF SCUM AND A GOLD COIN
さがら総・渡航 (Speakeasy)
Illustration
仙人掌
ダッシュエックス文庫

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さがら総・渡航 (Speakeasy)
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CHARACTER

久佐丘 雨音
Amane Kusaoka
Haruma's older sister. She works as the nurse at the school Yu and the others attend. She shows no mercy to her little brother.
SIBLINGS
久佐丘 晴磨
Haruma Kusaoka
A second year at Teihen High School. No friends and no girlfriend. After a certain trigger, he meets with Yu who he shouldn't meet due to being in different years.
Haruma's junior whose a year younger. She's a well-known beauty on campus. After a certain trigger, she cooperates with Haruma to find a girl student...?
COOPERATION
HOMEROM TEACHER
栗宇桐華
Kirika Kuriu
Haruma's homeroom instructor. She's gentle, but is very caring to her students.
千種 夜羽
Yu Chigusa
SIBLINGS
千種 美沙
Misa Chigusa
Yu's little sister. Second year in middle schol. She's frail but she's as cute as an angel.

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Please send any and all comments to nanodesuadmin@googlegroups.com

Credits

ORIGINAL AUTHORS

Watari Wataru

Sou Sagara

ILLUSTRATOR

Saboten

TRANSLATOR

Frog-kun

PROJECT SUPERVISOR

Msirp

PROJECT EDITORS

MirageGSM

Msirp

TYPESETTER

DevilHands

Qualidea
of Scum and
a Gold Coin
Presented by:

NanoDesu Translations

And he saith unto me,
Seal not up the words of the prophecy of this book;
for the time is at hand.
He that is unrighteous, let him do unrighteousness still:
and he that is filthy, let him be made filthy still:
and he that is righteous, let him do righteousness still:
and he that is holy, let him be made holy still.
Behold, I come quickly;
and my reward is with me,
to render to each man according as his work is.
Revelation to John (Johannes) 22: 10-12, ASV

Chapter 1
Haruma

There's a thought that always comes to mind whenever I read light novels:

"The illustrations count for everything."

When you have insufferable dialogue saturated with crappy moe clichés, a masturbatory power fantasy setting, characters ripped off various works by other talentless hacks, and boring prose even a middle schooler could read—no, even an elementary schooler could *write*—the illustrations quickly become the sole redeeming feature. Light novels are excruciating to read, but the illustrations make them readable.

The basis for pleasure lies in the eye of the beholder. In other words, what you see is what you get.

It's a lie when they say surface appearances count for ninety per cent. They count for everything, I tell you. One hundred and ten percent.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one thinking that. Plenty of others must think so too.

The Ugly Duckling, an assigned reading in the integrated elective unit "The World of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairytales", is pretty much one of those stories.

Basically, the story goes like this: "Life is on easy mode when your appearance changes for the better. At the very least, you won't get skinned for a Chinese gourmet dish. Those cheap foie gras bastards knew what they were doing!"

That's the message Hans Christian Andersen conveys through the story. Ugliness is a sin. Well, not that I really know if he meant that. It was certainly the message I took away from Andersen's work, though. I could feel the pathos in that tale as keenly as if it were my own. It made me wonder if I was Andersen. I was totally Andersen.

So much so that I'd clutch my bayonets and say amen.

Maybe, just maybe, one could assume The Ugly Duckling is a story that gives hope to the unattractive.

The truth, however, is a different matter. Only an obnoxious Brothers Grimm fanatic could pull such a shallow reading out of thin air (lol).

There is no hope in that tale. It is nothing more than a revenge fantasy against the destructive power of beauty, which denies the existence of ugliness. The duckling takes revenge by becoming even more beautiful than those that reject him. At no point does friendship or hard work come into it; victory comes entirely through pedigree.

You don't really see protagonists like that even in *Shonen Jump* these days.

For argument's sake, let's say that fairytales are the foundation of human philosophy. The cold truth is that Andersen wrote a story in vague fear that the ugly will never be accepted for who they are.

So that's what I wrote in my book report after the lecture.

Of course, I regret it now. Why didn't I write something safer? Why didn't I come up with some half-assed flattery that would make the teacher happy, just like the other students did? I knew

that the strange, peculiar and unusual are readily excluded from the crowd. Andersen didn't have to tell me that.

"Hey, Haruma…" Kusaoka Amane, the teacher in charge, called out my name with a soft sigh.

It was lunch time, and the two of us were in the nurse's office, where the smell of antiseptic assailed my nostrils.

Kusaoka Amane made me sit on the bed while she dragged over a chair and sat in front of me. Gingerly, she crossed her long and slender legs, causing her lab coat and tight skirt to make a rustling sound. When she leaned over to peer down at my face, hugging those legs of hers, the shape of her chest came into view through her blouse. Once again, Amane-chan let out a sigh as if to say "come hither".

Thin curtains cut off my bed from the outside world, and the two of us sat unusually close. It was always like this whenever she called me over.

It was early in the afternoon and I was sitting on the edge of a bed in the nurse's office, alone with a beautiful female teacher in a lab coat. Not to mention the teacher was sighing in a "come hither" way. If you ask me, I bet that would perk a pubescent boy's interest right off the bat.

But this could not be further from reality.

This room was no porno set, nor was it the product of a fevered adolescent boy's imagination. It was merely a confessional. Or, you might say, a room for sermons.

Amane-chan flicked her hair, causing a fluffy perfumed scent to attack my nostrils. *Did she change her perfume again? Her last*

one was better. As those pointless thoughts ran through my mind, Amane-chan glared daggers at me.

"Hey, Haruma. Have you ever thought about my position here?"

"Your position… Well, you're the health teacher, I guess."

"That's right." Amane-chan nodded eagerly. "I'm the young and pretty health teacher." She repeated what I just said with some rather superfluous additions.

Then suddenly, her bobbing head movements came to a jarring halt.

"Oh, and I'm also your big sister." She pointed at me with a flourish.

"Mm, yeah, I guess."

This should go without saying, but Kusaoka Amane and Kusaoka Haruma are siblings bound by blood, and for whatever reason they also go to the same school and have a teacher-student relationship. Thanks to that, there was no way I could entertain carnal desires, even inside a room resembling a porno set. In fact, I could do nothing but marvel at what my idiotic sister was saying for the umpteenth time.

My sister being who she was, I made it my business to stay as far away from the nurse's office as I could. Unfortunately, there were numerous exceptions, like whenever she wanted a maid or a punching bag for her stress. Today, it was probably the latter.

Amane-chan pulled out a non-tobacco pipe from the breast pocket of her lab coat and stuck it between her teeth. "If you get it, then quit being a pain at school, you moron. Whenever you

do something stupid, I'm the one who gets a talking-to in the staffroom."

"Isn't that just because they don't like you? It's not like I do anything wrong."

"Yes, you do! Like, you know, that report you wrote today, or whatever it was? You wrote some weird stuff in it."

She leered at me, prompting me to search my memories. The search retrieved only one result.

"You're not talking about… how ugly people have no human rights?"

"Yeah! I don't get it, but it's probably that! You write so much crap! Don't act so cocky! You need to look in the mirror! You always have this miserly look on your face!"

"Don't worry about me," I said. "If you're a guy, you can buy human rights."

Amane-chan didn't look as if she disagreed. "Well, yeah. You can do anything if your assets and income are high enough."

Heh, so she agreed, huh? You see, if guys actually do have a high income, they can always manage to get by. Long ago, in the days of yore before the bubble burst, the so-called Three Hs were what it took for a person to be popular: High Education, High Stature, High Income. Any blemishes related to one's face were not part of the deal, so there was probably no such thing as facial discrimination against a man. But geez, women from that time were certainly something. Did they judge people solely based on those three categories? Equivalent exchange is supposed to be the foundation of alchemy, so if they want to create such an ideal boyfriend, they ought to give up an arm or a leg.

Well, my sister was one of those types. She had a nice enough face and figure, but her personality was trash by her own admission.

Amane-chan had a subdued look in her eyes, and after a while, she coughed uncomfortably. “Well, anyway, even if you’re technically right, from an education perspective we can’t have that. They really didn’t like your answer—I mean, they even complained to me. The old hag in charge of the subject isn’t exactly a looker, so what you did was really annoying. Think before you act, geez.”

“Didn’t you just majorly discriminate against her looks? Not to mention you were ageist on top of that.”

“I’m not saying it to her face, so it’s fine,” Amane-chan chuckled as she stuck out her chest with pride.

Yep, today the world remains at peace because of someone’s “unspoken kindness”. I’m a kind soul as well, so I practice my “unspoken kindness” by never speaking to my classmates. And yet even though everyone is so used to my kindness these days, the sparks of conflict still rise to the surface here and there. How very peculiar.

“Even though you aren’t saying it to her face, you’re the one who gets a talking-to, so isn’t that a problem with your own personality, Amane-chan?”

As soon as those words came out of my mouth, Amane-chan waved a hand fervently in denial, her face completely straight. “Nope. It has nothing to do with my personality. Got it? When you’re the young and pretty health teacher, it’s stupid how low your standing in the staffroom is!” She prattled on and on. “My

colleagues sexually harass me and belittle me right in the open! And to top it off, I have boys pretending to be sick at the nurse's office every day, and a bunch of jealous bitches glare at me like I'm their enemy! I want to hurry up and get married and quit this job!"

Her voice got a bit choked up at the end there.

Being a teacher sure is tough. As those pointless thoughts went through my head, the curtains partitioning the bed began to shake.

"Excuse me, Sensei?"

A small, timid hand pushed the curtain aside. Large, trembling eyes peered at us uncertainly through the gap. The girl who had called out to us probably still had a fever judging by the redness of her cheeks and the puffiness of her eyes.

As soon as our eyes met, she scurried into the curtain's shadow like a small animal. Then, as she trembled in alarm, she peered in my direction once again.

That helpless gesture was adorable as hell. Judging from her uniform, she appeared to be a student from the middle school division.

Amane-chan came to her senses when the girl called out to her. Scraping her chair around, she turned to face the owner of the voice.

"S-Sooorry, Misa-chan. You know what my little brother's like," she said, giggling.

"Nonono, I'm the one who should be sorry! I didn't know whether I should speak up, but, um, I was just wondering about where the fever medicine was…? Was that bad of me to ask?"

The girl named Misa-chan stroked her pigtails anxiously and looked from me to Amane-chan. It seemed she was worried about interrupting our conversation. Having guessed that, Amane-chan stood up and patted Misa-chan lightly on the shoulder.

"No, no, not at all. If something is bothering you, it's best if you speak up straight away. Look, you know how the saying goes: speak now or forever hold your annoying little brother."

"That's not how the saying goes," I said. "Does my family hate my guts or what?"

What, did Amane-chan hate me? Even though I was quite fond of my older sister? Well, I dunno about my parents or my sis, but my gramps sure loves me. He gives me Werther's Originals and stuff. Grandma pretty much always gives me Rumandos or Elises. I've gotten sick of eating Elises, so whenever she whips them out, I get melancholy. The melancholy of Elise…1

Amane-chan only smiled, though, unruffled by my vehement arguing. Misa-chan, who was left watching our exchange from the sidelines, cracked an awkward and uneasy smile. Well, it's hard to know what to do when people you don't know very well have a conversation filled with in-jokes. At times like these, it was best to smile and nod.

"'Kay, I'm off now."

At this rate, I'd be forcing this cute girl to smile insincerely the same way I did in the classroom. I waved casually in Amane-chan's direction and made my way past Misa-chan.

Right then, just as I passed her, Misa-chan ducked her head and bowed. Her hair tie, which was wrapped around her faint black

hair, bobbed up from the movement. She had a diminutive figure, in a charming sort of way, coupled with thin shoulders and a flat chest. Her cheeks were bright red and her eyes were watery. The sight of her pressing her slender fingers against her tiny lips as she let out a muffled little cough added to her charm. She had a weird sort of sex appeal.

The word "angelic" fit Misa-chan like a glove. One could also interpret that to mean she was too good for this sinful earth.

"Oh, right. Haruma." A voice assailed me from behind as soon as I put my hand on the door of the nurse's office.

"Yeah?"

"The landing in front of the roof has been dirty these days. See, they told me a lot of stuff in the staffroom. They said clean the landing after school. They also told me to tell my little brother to reflect on his actions," Amane-chan said with a wink, even though that was all probably her job to begin with. She probably got busted smoking on the rooftop or something.

Unfortunately, a little brother exists to serve his sister as a slave. Alternatively, you might say that an older sister exists to carve trauma against women into her brother's heart. If you were to call older sisters a scourge on this earth, that would be an entirely accurate statement. On a whim, they'd flip from cute to fire-breathing monster in the blink of an eye. At times, they'd come to you with crocodile tears. I've built up tolerance for women (in a bad way), and I know way more about their biological cycles than I ever wanted to know.

"…Yeah, I'll do it," I answered, putting my hand on the door to leave the nurse's office for real. That caused the door to creak open.

At that moment, my feet stopped in their tracks.

A lone girl stood before my eyes.

Sparkling sunlight streamed through the corridor window, and a hazy breeze carried the subtle, sweet scent of Anna Sui perfume.

Her black hair was long and straight, her pale skin seemed to shine, and her delicate limbs were slender and lithe. Her large eyes and alluring lips widened in surprise.

The word "goddess-like" fit this girl like a glove. One could also interpret that to mean her beauty could wipe out this earth on a whim.

I knew this girl's name. Of course, she couldn't say the same for me. Mind you, I didn't have to go out of my way to dig it up or anything. I just happened to know it naturally, as part of the common knowledge shared by many students at this school.

Chigusa Yuu. It was my first time seeing this girl, one year my junior, up so close.

This momentous encounter with Chigusa almost ended with us literally butting heads, and the two of us took a step back accordingly.

For her part, her expression took on an air of surprise, but I was pretty sure my face looked completely idiotic. The only one frozen to the spot, though, was me. She instantly produced a bashful smile and lowered her head courteously, passing me from the side. My gaze followed her instinctively.

"Oh, Onee-chan! I'm sorry!" Misa-chan called out, having noticed for herself that the girl in front of her was Chigusa. "You came even though you're so busy…"

"There's no way I could have something more important than Misa-chan. Are you feeling okay?"

The sight of Chigusa gently pressing her hand against Misa-chan's forehead was like something out of a painting. I see, so Misa-chan was Chigusa Yuu's sister, huh? That would explain why she was so cute.

As I glanced furtively at the pair of sisters, angel and goddess respectively, I closed the door behind me. The door banged against the back of my head.

If I was just a little bit more like Amane-chan, I would have had quite a nice face. How did I end up with such a miserly mug? When you look at it through another perspective, if I have one defect or two or three or four… well, however many defects I have, that in itself is proof that I am human. Which meant that girl was something else altogether.

This world really is unfair, and as a result, it reeks with discrimination.

It's not a matter of being special or unique—that's common sense which anyone with half a brain would grasp.

Even knowing that, I could not help but think: *Chigusa Yuu…* has a nice face. A really nice face!

1 Werther's Original and Elise are popular candies. They are also sex jokes. The Japanese dubbed version of the Werther's Original commercial turned into an internet meme because the awkward translation made it sound like the grandfather had

sexual interest in his grandson. “The melancholy of Elise” is a reference to one of the Sexy Commando techniques from the cult 1998 anime Sexy Commando Gaiden: Sugoi yo!! Masaru-san. “The melancholy of Elise” involves pulling down the flyer of one’s trousers while making orgasm sounds.

Haruma

As I left the nurse’s office behind, loud voices clamored around me. Lunch break was just about to end, and the rush of footsteps echoed through the hallway and classrooms.

I hate the Japanese word for crowds: *hitogomi*. I don’t like people (*hito*) and I don’t like trash (*gomi*), so I can see no reason to like the two things put together. In comparison, I love the Japanese word for “a cold”: kaze. It’s made up of the characters for “wind” and “evil”. It’s totally overblown and that’s why I love it.

To be fair, I did try my hardest at one point to like crowds.

When I was little, I attempted a lot of things: junior baseball league, swimming school, mental arithmetic tutoring, calligraphy class, piano lessons. Almost all of them were things that, well, Amane-chan dragged me to. Either that or it was for her benefit. I never really took a liking to them. Thanks to that, I got surprisingly little bang for my buck. I demand a refund.

There was only one lesson I took to heart.

“You should think of humans as pumpkins!”

That’s what my piano instructor said when I was nervous before a piano performance. Rather well-worn words, but since the old hag was the one saying them, I had to give them a whirl. Gotta respect your elders, right?

As it turned out, though, there was a kernel of truth in the old hag's words. Indeed, when you think about them in terms of water levels, humans and vegetables are not so different. When you consider their common trait—they're both sacks of water—they're on a nearly equal plane of existence. Good old hag. The older the wiser, or however it goes. She said some good stuff. Thanks, granny.

Thanks to her, I've been under the assumption ever since that humans are vegetables. Well, not that the old hag's words helped with my nervousness—I still screwed up my piano performance and quit soon afterwards. Sorry, granny.

Right then, I looked up at the sky through a window in the hallway. There, I could see slightly unusual clouds in the shape of temple bells at midnight. Internet denizens would be performing their hot takes at this very moment: *Whoa! Are those earthquake clouds?*

What idiots. Honestly, this world is full of pumpkin heads. Whenever signs of an earthquake appeared, the clouds themselves would turn into omens. The majority of them, it seemed, were actually just regular clouds. People just arbitrarily linked them to earthquakes, fooling others with their ignorance.

There are positives to twisting logic to one's own convenience. If you can allow it, you can kid yourself into believing that humans and vegetables are the same because they have similar water levels. Anyone saying that is a complete moron.

Well, for now.

How about I give you another similarity between humans and vegetables?

I've already said that I hate vegetables. However, I exclude strawberries and melons from that list.

Yuu

The girls' changing room after gym came to life like a paddy field after a shower of rain. There was hardly any room to breathe, not only because of the scent of perfume and powder that pervaded the room, but because of all the soft drink bottles and sweat towels being thrown around. Meanwhile, the chatter simply refused to die down— a croak here, a croak there, almost like a chorus of frogs.

Not that we had any real inkling of what frogs sounded like. In this day and age, a good deal of high school students living in the city have probably never seen a frog in the flesh.

As such, I took the liberty of using my imagination. Concealing my body behind an open locker door, I basked in this silent entertainment exercise.

Frogs peeling off layers one at a time.

Frogs spraying deodorant on themselves.

Frogs discussing love with their friends.

Whenever I mentally exchange my classmates for frogs, the changing room becomes quite a humorous scene. *Ribbit ribbit ribbit*. It always makes me smile to myself.

I am quite certain that in the world of the paddy field, a frog going out of its way to avoid you would be no cause for concern. Frogs are blunt. Frogs are strong. Frogs are free. All humans ought to become frogs.

If the Earth was a village of a hundred frogs, there would be no frogs with an unhealthy admiration towards swans. Undoubtedly, they would never notice their own blemishes and thus live forever in peace.

In my palm, I gripped a small white flower, the name of which I did not know. I don't believe this flower has ever considered that it

might become anything other than a flower until the day I plucked it. That must certainly be the definition of happiness.

A sigh slipped out my mouth, unbidden.

Spiral-shaped clouds coiled in the sky through the window I was gazing at, like an omen warning of an earthquake. Startled, I swallowed the sigh that had just escaped my throat.

There are people out there who would qualify as the fruits of that sort of twisted logic. When they see everything as an omen, nothing has meaning. People who believe that rubbish are pumpkin heads or identical to vegetables, just to give an example.

Yes, that is how they are.

But that is the logic of a strong-willed person. There is no sin in a delicious pumpkin.

In this world, people are somewhat more cowardly. Unless someone pushes them, they will not budge an inch.

Like me, for instance.

Omens and fortune telling might just be a catalyst for people without courage. Written prophecies and revelations are passed down through generations precisely because they offer guidance to people in doubt. I wonder if it really is such a bad thing to cling to some kind of invisible fate.

"Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes…" I murmured as I plucked the petals from my flower.

Of course, I was hiding in the locker's shadow as I did it. I am quite aware that flower fortune telling is old school to people of my age. I could easily imagine how I would be treated if my classmates spotted me in such a precarious position.

"Yes…"

The last remaining petal formed a wrinkle in my palm. Somehow, it felt like Misa's smiling face to me. My angelic little sister. Whenever I think of her, I feel like doing everything in my power for her.

Encouraged by that petal, I touched my smartphone and opened the messaging app.

Maria-san, I have a favour to ask of you…

From now on, I would have to interact with a very frightening individual.

For the sake of regaining something that had been stolen so unfairly from me— something dearly precious.

News Topics in Japanese Science

Today's News Topics

An Unknown Encounter with Voyager 2?

=NASA: "The irregularities in the incoming data cannot be explained…"

[Popular Series] Solar Physics Lecture No. 666

Has Mankind Forgotten His Dream to Reach the Sky…?

Doubts about "Metal Traces" Found in 230 Million Year-old Meteorite

=Heated Exchange between Researchers at Snap Meeting…

Death of Cambridge Professor

=Predicted the Existence of Wormholes; in Later Years He Predicted Tragedy…

Arrest of Man who Claims: "The Aliens Will Come Again…"

Scribbles Found in Science Museum in Tokyo's Taito Ward…

The Continued Failure of Rocket Launches

"Unknown Causes": Citizens Losing Faith…

Chapter 2

Haruma

The short homeroom period functions much like a starting block. At the signal announcing the end of school, the racers inside the classroom make their move.

However, not everyone gathered here was picked and bred for the occasion. They ranged from swift horses to fillies, packhorses to asses, piglets to raccoon dogs. There were foxes, cats, Mount Fuji, hawks, eggplants—well, you get the picture[1]. The classroom was a place where different tribes duked it out in a game of thrones. Among those buzzing, prattling voices, reverberating through the room like little ripples, one could make out a horse's whinny, a wolf's howl and even a frog's croak. In the midst of all this croaking and *croooooaking*, I, too, had been crying for some time now.

Between the school club goers, movie/karaoke goers and the lazy-asses-who-would-come-up-with-something, everyone had their afterschool plans in mind as they turned their gazes towards the teacher's platform.

"Lately, there have been reports of young people going missing. Are you all aware of this?" asked the homeroom teacher Kuriu-sensei in a composed tone of voice one might also describe as bland.

"Be careful going home if you finish late because of club activities and whatnot. No stopping for detours or going out after dark."

As she spoke, she raised a stern finger and gazed slowly around the room at each and every student, not that the students were having any of it. The complaints poured out of them like squeals from a bunch of piglets.

"Aww!"

"That stinks!"

The whining rose to a crescendo from boys and girls alike, sweeping through the entire classroom. The only one who didn't get defiant was basically the person who ignored the entire conversation in favour of internet news topics—me.

Kuriu-sensei lightly clapped her hands in an effort to stifle the dissenting voices. "I understand that you want to have fun. But if something were ever to happen to all of you, I would be very sad… so please show me your happy faces tomorrow. All right, that ends today's homeroom. Goodbye, everyone."

The moment she uttered those gentle parting words, all hell broke loose among the students.

There were some who launched themselves out of the classroom, others who hung around chattering in a group, and still others who beckoned *over here or over there*. Each and every one of them had been liberated by that wrinkle in time known as "the afterschool hours".

These people can be sorted into three broad categories.

First, there are the goody-two-shoes club-goers. Some pour themselves into their club activities day and night, while others chill out and have a good time. Generally speaking, however, they all spend most of their school life doing club activities.

Next, we have the popular clique. They're keenly aware of the link between work and school and thus mainly live their lives in the pursuit of afterschool fun: karaoke, bowling, darts, billiards and, last but not least, love-related matters. Their quintessential high school lives overflow with youthful radiance.

They're pretty much the kind of people who tend to use phrases like "all-nighter", "glugging" and "getting smashed".

Finally, let's not forget the "my way is the highway" people who live for their hobbies. In all likelihood, their anime, manga and games were shunned in ages past. While they might still be seen as social outcasts in today's world, they don't experience that fate at this school. Both sexes are equally enthusiastic about the current anime season and their favourite seiyuu. Those kids have a lot of influence in this class.

These three groups intermingled, only occasionally breaking away into clearly defined cliques. They were woven into the very fabric of school life. Even the most diligent club-goer falls in love, and the popular kids read Weekly Shonen Jump. The otaku go out in mixed-gender groups to sing karaoke on their way home from school. In fact, messy love problems were a relatively common affair in the otaku circle. Specifically, it's awkward when so many ugly people make out in public.

Kids these days—they're ruled by their hormones. Their lives are full of illicit fraternising. Man, they mingle with alien species so much it makes me wonder if they want to work for NASA. It takes one short hour for them to say, *I'll be right here*.

Castes and groups may vary, but they all offer the same things: friendship, love, hobbies—and a way to live out one's youth.

However, to compensate, one is bound hand and foot by time, appointments and social obligations.

What a sad state of affairs…

Ordinarily, controlling time and people's plans is what an overlord would do, but even that is beyond their capabilities… Ahaha! What a shame! Sucks to be them! Between me and them, it should be obvious who deserves pity!

1 A Japanese superstition states that it is good luck to dream of Mount Fuji, a hawk and an eggplant on your first night after the New Year.

Haruma

Since it really was quite a sad state of affairs, I hurried outside to go study in the library instead. Now that it was May, I pretty much spent all my time like this. I had neither cash nor people to hang out with—no club activities either. The only reason I had no one to hang out with was because I had no use for idiots and losers. But the fact that I didn't hang out with smart or good-looking people was a huge dilemma! How did it come to this?!

Basically, the one thing I had going for me was time. I made optimal use of what I have, as one should.

Besides reading and studying, I played with my cell phone from time to time and mess around on mobile games. Since I lived by the principle of never paying a cent on games, whenever I ran out of action points in a game I just studied and read until they recharged.

Okay, I was good. I really did make excellent use of my time. Studying totally comes in handy in the future, so I wasn't

wasting my high school life in the slightest. *I'm good, yep. N-No problem here, folks…*

I whipped my gaze towards the window in an attempt to rejuvenate my tired, leaden eyes. It was already evening.

The school building was probably vacated by now. Perfect. Time to do those service club activities Amane-chan shoved down my throat at lunch time. I mean, performing such a conspicuous activity out in the open would spell death in the jungle. The same thing went for the concrete jungle.

I left the library and walked down the hallway. As I climbed up the stairs—first floor, then second, then third—the voices from the grounds became ever more distant. The human presence thinned out as well. They say that the air becomes thinner in high places, but isn't that because the air is too thick on the ground?

I came, I read, I ran away. When the air is thick, it's even more suffocating. It makes me think idiotic things, like that I'd gone on a different evolutionary path or something. Well, you know what they say about fools and high places. Only idiots get information, it seems.

Still, just who was it who came up with the idea of belittling people who aim high?

Obviously, someone who couldn't reach the sky. They could probably only derive satisfaction from looking down on those who climbed to the high places that they themselves could never attain.

For that reason, I didn't dislike the idea of approaching the sky, one floor at a time. That way, I could stay true to my conviction that detaching oneself from the world is the right thing to do.

Eventually, the sunset-tinted glass staircase ended at the landing in front of the roof. There was a door leading straight to the rooftop, but it was always locked, so students could not freely come and go.

This had to be the place Amane-chan was talking about.

Glancing around, I could see it was indeed a bit grimy. Dust balls had gathered in the corners, and buckets were strewn around the place. Oh, and the door of the cleaning locker featured a massive dent, as if someone had kicked it in.

When I tried to pull the locker open, it wouldn't budge, so I decided to tackle the problem with force.

And at that moment—

"Aaaaaaaargh!"

A bloodcurdling scream rang out. With a frenzied rattle that seemed to shake the entire roof, the door leading to the roof swung open.

A female student sprang out like a jack in the box. I thought we were going to collide, but I somehow got out of the way, at which point the girl darted down the stairs in one leap without so much as a backward glance.

"…What was that just now?"

I thought crashing into another person would lead to a beautiful romance. But that roar just now was a whole new level of strange, unheard of in daily life… *And holy crap, has no one been regulating entry to the rooftop?* I wondered as I peered at the roof in trepidation.

The door was still ajar, having been flung wide open. Beyond it lay the slightly grimy mortar ground, perfectly level and

secluded. Confronted with an unfamiliar scene, my feet stepped forward of their own accord.

A red, red sky.

The glow of the sunset was eerily beautiful, enough to make my hair stand on end. The cityscape appeared to be ablaze, and the sixty-story high-rise buildings resembled headstones dripping with blood.

Thoroughly shaken, I walked over to the fence. There, standing in a corner that had been just outside my vision until I drew near, was a girl.

Her bright red cheeks were dyed in the sun's afterglow, and her jet black hair was like a raven's feathers, dissolving into the darkness of the night. The girl stood in the precipice between two worlds, receiving the sunlight in front of her and the night behind her.

Chigusa Yuu was gazing at the sunset with misty eyes as a single tear rolled down her pale cheek.

Instinctively, I knew that I was not supposed to talk to her. For one thing, I had no idea what to say to a crying girl.

For another, I had no idea what to say to a girl in general.

More than anything, I could not bear to interrupt this utterly magnificent scene of a beautiful girl crying in the sunset.

As I drew back quietly in an attempt to leave the rooftop, Chigusa swung around like a flash and noticed me.

Silence.

Chigusa gazed at me with a blank and mystified expression, as if she had just discovered a masked palm civet in the middle of

town1. Meanwhile, tears continued to trickle down from the corners of her eyes.

"H-Hey…"

Making eye contact with someone and not saying anything is generally a bad idea. Having said that, spouting polite formalities at a younger person is even worse. However, talking like a Frenchman ("What ails you, mademoiselle? A weeping heart spoils this wonderful sunset.") is equally stupid. Wait, that might be how an Italian speaks. In the end, the only thing that came out of my mouth was a grunt so devoid of meaning it made me want to crawl into a hole and die.

Chigusa's expression didn't flicker. No reaction at all. She continued to look at me as if I were some kind of exotic beast.

A silence hung in the air between us.

…I recognise this. I recognise this vibe! It's like when Amane-chan cries at home!

Whenever you talk to a blubbering girl, they tell you, "I'm fine, so leave me alone." However, if you leave them alone, they say, "Why aren't you asking anything?" And if you actually do ask them what's bothering them, what they tell you is complete crap no one cares about.

They start off blubbering and end up jabbering—don't be swayed by a girl's tears.

In an attempt to leave before things got messy, I gave her my best meek-mannered smile, bowed politely in her direction and swung around.

Just then, I felt someone grab my blazer sleeve.

When I cast a glance sideways, Chigusa was clinging to my sleeve with her tiny hand.

"…"

Her fingers possessed a silent yet steely resolve, holding fast to my sleeve unflinchingly.

"Um…" I said as I peeled Chigusa's fingers off me slowly. I was stunned at how long, pretty and slender her fingers were, but I forced down the jolt that went through me.

At times like these, one shouldn't respond too much.

I mean, women are delicate creatures. They should be handled with extreme care—they're literally made of glass. Even if they do something wrong, one shouldn't treat them like a tumour. Women are sensitive about the way they're treated, so they burst into unnecessary hysterics—they're literally marbles.

Yet Chigusa, undeterred, summoned the strength in her fingers once again and gripped me even harder. The way she looked up at me with those teary eyes almost stopped my breath.

Her thin shoulders trembled with anxiety, and a barely discernible sigh slipped past her alluring lips. Chigusa and I were so close that she wouldn't even have to take a step forward to fall into my arms.

…I wasn't about to fall for that trick, though. I had been schooled for seventeen years in my sister's "Real-life Horror Story: A Girl's True Nature" course. Not that it was worth any credits.

"Um… you can let go," I said as calmly as I possibly could, all the while preparing to flee from this place.

But then a tear streaked down Chigusa's face once again. "Er, um…" she uttered. "Y-You see… my friend hasn't answered my calls in ages… I don't know what to do…"

"Um, that's not…"

What the hell was she spouting? Was she really okay with saying all that? Regardless, Chigusa went on as if my voice had failed to reach her.

"It's been three days and she hasn't answered my calls…"

Wow, that's short. Hey now, it's been over a month since I last made contact with my classmates. And we're in the same classroom, damn it…

"Maybe she has a cold, or the flu, or maybe family issues…"

"If that were the case, she still would have answered my calls… She has always done that until now… so why now…?" Chigusa seemed to be holding herself back, but she still let slip a muffled sob.

"I see. I see how it is. Yep. That sure would weigh on your mind."

From the way Chigusa was talking about it, it didn't seem like her situation would work out, so I remembered my sister's teachings and decided to hear Chigusa out for the time being. If Amane-chan's case was anything to go by, a girl would be halfway done with her spiel at this point. The other half of the conversation was guaranteed to be bitching behind her friend's back, yep! Damn, girls are scary!

That's how it seems to be when it comes to friends and besties, though. When you fall out of contact with them, it weighs on your mind and you end up arguing with them…

To be quite honest, I find it difficult to understand.

Keeping close contact with a friend and then starting a fight out of insecurity, or otherwise crying buckets over it—such actions have a way of taking over a person's life, making "best friends" little more than a formality. I'm inclined to think of those actions as highly calculated—ritualistic, even.

Frankly, I think it's ugly.

And yet—

Those tears were beautiful.

Regardless of her intent, the sight of those tears melting into the sunset was captivatingly beautiful.

"Well, there's something."

That was what I managed to come up with after fumbling my words. It prompted Chigusa to tilt her head and peer at me.

"What's something?"

What's something indeed? Don't ask something like that with such a cute face, damn it. This wasn't a modern literature question where you had to point to the correct answer, you know…

Still, I had a whole wealth of experience for times like these.

"Give it for one more day, and if she still hasn't called you, come talk to me again."

Awwright, this was the "Huh? You want to exchange phone numbers? …Ohh, uh, my cell phone batteries are dead right now, so I'll text it to you later, okay?" strategy I learned from the first day of class. Just how did that girl plan to text me when she didn't know my number…?

Yet even those evasive words did not seem to deter Chigusa. Her eyes lit up. “Wow… I-Is that okay?”

“Yeah. See you later.” I smiled brightly and waved, prompting her to bob her head eagerly. Ahh, what a nice girl.

If I could speak, you would understand. Such fine words. The Prime Minister who said that was summarily murdered, for dialogue is useless. Maybe the guy who killed him was part of the cat faction. He really wouldn’t get along with poor Inukai-san2.

As the girl in front of me bowed her head, I quickly took my leave.

We would never meet again anyway. A pure and sweet young beauty like Chigusa Yuu had nothing in common with a lone wolf like Kusaoka Haruma.

I entered the school building, closing the door to the roof softly behind me.

1 Masked palm civets are cat-sized mammals mostly found in rural Japan, although more and more of them have been discovered in urban areas in recent years. A number of recent high-profile confrontations between masked palm civets and humans in Tokyo have turned the animals into something of an internet meme. See for example: http://en.rocketnews24.com/2014/11/16/police-called-in-for-civet-disturbance-in-tokyo/

2 There are two parts to this joke. The first part is a reference to the May 15 Incident of 1932, when eleven young Imperial Japanese Navy officers shot the Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi. Inukai’s last words were roughly If I could speak, you would understand, to which his killers replied Dialogue is

useless. This event helped spur Japan's militarism, which led to the eventual Second Sino-Japanese War. The second part of the joke is that the 'inu' in 'Inukai' means dog. In Japan, lovers of dogs or cats identify as part of the "dog faction" or "cat faction" respectively, and these two factions are supposedly at war with each other.

Yuu

If I had to name one thing I loathe in regards to entertainment, it would be stories that depict conflict.

This thought always occurs to me whenever I watch dramas, listen to operas or read a novel. No matter how sophisticated the theme is, I feel disgusted whenever the characters misunderstand each other in a ham-fisted manner.

Our time is finite. No person can live forever. No matter how great a human being one is—even if that person happens to be a flawless and all-knowing god or a superior life form of equivalent virtue, blessed with good looks and peerless intellect—the human lifespan is predetermined.

What lies ahead of us is sweet despair.

The harsh extinction of one's consciousness. A nightmare that stretches into eternity. A snare that reaches into the void.

Every day we live, we edge one step closer to death. There is no guarantee that one will live to see tomorrow.

Every time I watch a story that wastes time on misunderstandings, I want to scream. Do they really have that much time to spare in their lives? Do they have nothing in common? So why do they do it? They may invent feelings and concoct encounters, but in the end it is all about themselves. Instead of paying any heed whatsoever to the person they misunderstood, they focus solely on their own story.

Is there really anything in this world more terrible than dying out of lack of anything better to do?

Yuu

"—So then, could you please lay off with the threats…?" I complained with all the pathos I could muster.

Two long shadows stretched across the roof. The dusk-filled May air was clear even this high above ground, and wispy illusions fell across the surroundings. Even to my own ears, my voice sounded as if it was petering off into the wind, weak and flimsy. I thought that something must have happened because the ground shook beneath my feet, but then I realised that my legs were wobbling like jelly.

"Dying, killing. Please don't utter such mortifying words so casually…"

"Whatchu say?!"

The girl in front of me—Maria-san—raised her voice in anger as she shot me a glare.

It was a dreadful look.

She backed me against the fence and opened her mouth wide, as if threatening to eat me up right that minute. She resembled some sort of hypertrophied bullfrog.

I regretted not bringing along any recording equipment. If I had possession of the deplorable parts of her speech that, mere moments ago, had included liberal use of unspeakable words, I imagine the foul language would be reined in rather quickly and effectively.

Of course, I would not actually do it. Even now, I still thought of her as a friend. Selling out a friend was the one thing I did not want to do.

"Please, calm yourself down…" I said, recoiling.

Unfortunately, that only had the effect of pouring oil on a fire.

"Chigusa! You think you're in any position to say that?!"

Maria-san banged her fist against the fence, breathing wildly. Her frog punch made such an explosive impact it threatened to split open my ears[1]. I nearly curled up like an armadillo at the sound of it.

She had a point: when one compared our relative standings, I had no right to complain. No matter how much societal values change, the weak can only blindly follow the strong.

And yet, even so…

"I only want to ask where Shia-san is…"

I attempted to talk things through.

If I could speak, you would understand—those are famous words. They are supposed to be a universal human principle. That goes for everyone: Prime Ministers and assassins, editors and novelists penning the beginning of their stories well past the deadline, and bill collectors and a debt-ridden person on the verge of bankruptcy alike.

After all, we have no reason not to understand after talking things through.

"If she doesn't call me, I'll be in trouble… My money…"

"That's the only thing that comes out of your gob—money, money, money! Don't you have something else that's important to you?!" she yelled at me, causing me to recoil once again. That did not sound like the words of someone who would cheerfully borrow someone else's money.

Had I made a mistake? What was this "something else that's important" she mentioned?

Figuring I had better take stock of the situation, I glanced around. Beyond the cluster of inner city buildings towering over the surroundings like a forest of bamboo shoots, an unusually large evening sun was melting into the horizon.

Today, the world was painted in a shade of red darker than even fresh blood. Though some might claim that the deep, dark redness is chilling, to me it sparkled brilliantly, like a cut diamond. It is not much to brag about, but the view from my school rooftop is undoubtedly one of those things that cannot be bought with money.

As I gazed down upon that spectacular sunset view, I thought to myself: *in this ephemeral human existence, what is most important?*

—Money, of course.

There is nothing that cannot be bought with money. In the unlikely event that something priceless existed, it would not be worth one micron in this capitalist society, so it is the same as not existing. It is really nothing to brag about.

A cut diamond? Our society believes more in cold, hard cash than jewellery, so that sort of thing is rather dubious.

Yes, I was fairly certain I had not made a mistake.

Feeling relieved, I turned back to Maria-san. "If you cannot tell me, I really will be in trouble. I will be neck deep in trouble. Running off with borrowed money is a grave offence in today's business world."

These days, more and more young people have been vanishing into the night. People with many dreams—or, to put it bluntly, those who are severely wanting in any form of plan for their lives—are the prime targets for money lending, although recently they have been delaying their repayments at an unusual rate. I can only assume that they got together behind the scenes and made off with my finances.

I, too, have been slighted. This would be the only time that a girl who appears as delicate and beautiful on the outside as I would ever be so reproachful.

"L-Like I said, it's the Random Crossroad!"

"Uh-huh."

"For sure she disappeared because of that urban legend!"

"I've heard quite enough," I sighed, shaking my hand limply.

Maria-san had a very firm friendship with that aimless girl, and now she wanted to make use of my finances for herself.

Even as she received life as a frog, she had unrealistic dreams of becoming a swan, and so she would rely on another person's money. Frogs are frogs, after all. *Ribbit ribbit ribbit.* They sing their habitual song, the artefact of the simple and easy existence they ought to aspire to.

Everyone who is not me ought to become a frog. That being said, if the world did happen to be a village of a hundred frogs, I would instantly leave it for a human village.

It takes one to know one: a frog to know a frog, and a person swamped in debt to know the thought process of a person swamped in debt.

Thus, I called her and attempted to speak to her, only to hear it was all because of some urban legend.

The so-called Random Crossroad.

The scene: a T-junction in a residential area, gleaming with orange light from a convex traffic mirror. If you walk down the path at midnight holding hands with your lover, a fourth road appear at the end of the junction. If you choose the wrong path, you may never return.

"What a trifling matter…"

I know not about randomness or romantic interludes, but I prefer to stay within means, even when it comes to how I am insulted. It is quite all right to be frightened by the occult until you are in grade school. It is fine to think of dates and liaisons until you are in middle school. That's all well and good, but I would prefer to have my money back.

"Maria-san, if you are unwilling to be straight with me, I may or may not increase the rate of interest on your loan."

"I can't believe you…! Die! Piss off!"

Once again, she used very mortifying vocabulary. My legs shook beneath me.

I simply could not die and leave things the way they were, not when I had failed to collect the average two hundred per cent return on the money I lent.

"Besides, I only borrowed thirty grand. Why is it up to fifty, no, a hundred grand?"

"It went from forty thousand to five hundred thousand, to be precise."

"What a rip-off!"

"I explained to you about the interest rate when I lent it to you. At the time you were putting your seal on the blank IOU, nothing would sway you."

"No way… I mean, it went up so much…"

It always turns out like this. Debtors are all the same. When they borrow, they do so happily, but when the time comes for them to return the money, they grumble about so many trivial things. Honestly, it makes me wonder if there is a business in betraying people who would lend money out of the goodness in their hearts.

“You may consult your parents on the matter. For my part, I will prepare an explanation as to what you planned to use the money for.”

Maria-san had borrowed money to go on an overnight trip with her secret boyfriend. I was able to save a number of photos of the happy couple in my image folder—photos that seemed to hold multiple meanings. Transmitting photo attachments of the lovey-dovey pair would be a simple matter.

“Urk…”

A flustered Maria-san gripped the fence and stood stock still.

It was clear as day that the two of us were high above ground—even a monkey would be aware of that fact. If this were a case of armadillo versus frog, the armadillo would simply roll over and splat—that would be the end of that. It would not even take three seconds to achieve an easy victory. And so, even if the weak can only follow the strong, I was nonetheless willing to come to a compromise through talking. I would certainly appreciate it if Maria-san lent her assistance.

“All you need to do is tell me where she is. I’m quite sure it won’t be any trouble to you at all, Maria-san. I will handle the rest.”

“Why are you so hung up on Shia…? You’ve already made enough profit, so why don’t you just leave her alone…?”

“Why, you ask? Are we not friends?” I said with a smile.

Debtors who return money are good friends. At the very least, I record them on my friends list.

On that note, the principle of “don’t let them live, but don’t let them die” is standard practice in the profession known as moneylending. Only a fool would let go of friends who produce

money. Friendship is beautiful when it is backed by cold, hard reality, unfettered by flimsy illusions.

"You…" I wonder if Maria-san was moved as well. Her cheeks were blushing bright red.

She gazed at me with narrowed eyes overflowing with violent emotion and said:

"You… bitch!"

All of a sudden, a sound rang out, perfectly tonal and aesthetically pleasing.

She struck me on the cheek. She struck *me.*

At the same instant I realised this fact, my cheek began to twinge with pain.

"Er, uh… sor—"

Maria-san seemed to have come to her senses, for she clenched the palm she had just struck me with in a flustered manner. I was quite certain that she had acted out of reflex.

She must have been a peaceable girl, once upon a time. I understood very well that she had no intention of starting a fight. It was quite clear to me that she had lost all leeway for negotiation, so there was more than enough room in my heart to take the extenuating circumstances into consideration.

Since I was able to understand that much, making amends was an easy matter. Someone who would be angered by a mere slap is no decent person, of that I am sure.

"—That hurt."

"… Eek!"

As I nursed my cheek, our eyes met and her face turned pale.

It was as if she were gazing upon a hateful demon from hell. As she trembled with naked fear, she twisted her hip as if to flee.

She stumbled back a step and then another.

“Let’s have a nice, proper talk, shall we?”

“Aaaaaaaargh!”

The moment I extended my hand, she let out a shriek and fled the rooftop.

What on earth was that?

Not only had I been threatened, I had also been struck. I had been trodden underfoot. I was overwhelmingly the victim here.

Did I really seem like the villain?

Panicked beyond belief, I gazed up at the blood-red evening sky, which looked like something from another world.

1 The Frog Punch is one of Aoki Masaru’s finishing moves in the boxing manga Hajime no Ippo.

FULL METAL JUDGMENT

Shiva ★ Resurrection

The reincarnated form of Shiva,
Shiba Kazuya sought to play at Koshien for his dead brother Tatsuya.
That day, however, a guardian spirit told him
that the world was in grave danger…
The people had lost their faith and convictions
and the world was teetering on destruction.
To prevent that, he has to take back the match!
Believe that Kazuya's faith and playing style will save the world…!

See the light! The decline of the world!
Throw it! The Deadly Magic Ball of Nirvana!
Hit it! A batting form that decimates the opponent!

(Also showing) URGENT G7 SUMMIT! DIVINE PROTECTION WITH WORDS!

Ensuing world panic, the destruction of the ecosystem, dwindling energy, famine.
And then, the anticipated final World War.
As society lies in rubbles, the G7 talks in circles.
Only in these cinemas—An all-night fear festival! Face divine retribution if you don't watch it!

A BOX OFFICE SENSATION!

Chapter 3
Haruma

In the kitchen, the pot was making a gurgling sound. As the contents slowly built up heat, I watched on vacantly. Now that the dish had finally boiled, it was about time to take it out and drain the hot water. All that was left was to pour it all in a bowl and voilà—the stew was done. When I brought a spoon to my mouth, it really did have a "homely" sort of taste.

There's a wonderful sense of comfort in something that tastes generic. There might be a tendency to take lines like *one of a kind*and *irreplaceable* as the highest compliments, but in my opinion, all-purpose disposables are the most wonderful things of all. Like corporate slaves and subcontractors!

As I ate my stew and chewed on those thoughts, the door opened with a clank. My sister was back, it seemed. I heard heavy, dragging footsteps approaching me from her room.

"I'm hoooome."

"Hey."

When I looked over my shoulder, Amane-chan was standing there dressed in her house clothes: hot pants and a T-shirt that revealed the shape of her bulging chest. The start of summer might be just around the corner, but wasn't she being a bit *too* loose?

"Oh, you're eating stew. I'll have some too, 'mkay."

Amane-chan headed for the kitchen, pulled out a retort pouch from the cupboard, piled the contents on a plate and tossed it

into the microwave. It seemed she had no desire to wait for the water to boil.

"Teehee, this is my reward for today's hard work… Just a tiny bite…"

A suspiciously grim smile came over her face as she held the burning hot stew and sat across from me. Oh, and she was also holding a can of beer and a pack of potato chips. My sister subsisted on a junk food diet.

"Is it really okay for you to eat that crap when you're a health teacher?"

"What's the big deal? No matter what I eat, it's obviously bad for the body, after all."

"R-Right…"

Her eating habits were one thing, but saying all that aloud was pretty damn unfitting for a health teacher…

Even now, she was drowning her chips in stew and slurping down beer. You could say she was the candid type, but she was honestly just crass… It was as if her personality was the polar opposite of my cute and innocent yet simultaneously wise and intellectual self. We share the same mother, so why are we so different? Please enlighten me, Professor Mendel.

"Your eating habits don't make one squat of difference. I mean, you have no idea what's really inside your dinner."

All of this came straight from a beer guzzler, although my sister's words did contain an element of truth.

Society is built on trust. Trust that goes by the name of cold resignation. Only resignation built on lies and self-deception can bring peace to a person's heart.

You could raise a million doubts about the information in the daily newspaper, the product label on your lunch or the age of a girl in the night business, so it's impossible to seek the truth.

That's why everyone shuts up and accepts what they're given. When all's said and done, trust is possible when everyone gives up on understanding or seeking the truth.

Food, production, information, education, finance. Society is built upon trust in every industry under the sun. Truly, this world is a beautiful place. As far as I'm concerned, the only thing that doesn't fall under the umbrella of "trust" is the matter of blood relations.

This sister of mine was, at this very moment, opening up a second can of beer as she calmly uttered a very faithless thing indeed.

"You'll ruin your body if you care too much about health. Eat what you want and do what you want and your body will take care of itself."

"Don't say that at school… It's a big thing for growing boys, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. But even if you do watch what you eat, it doesn't necessarily make you healthy…"

"Well, yeah. Not that it's a good reason to drink like a fish…"

This was all about indulging oneself endlessly as a so-called reward, wasn't it?

"I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about Misa-chan—you know, that girl from the nurse's office today? See, that girl has nothing wrong with her diet, but she's kinda got a weak constitution. She doesn't have any bad habits either, so I couldn't find any root causes like this one. I'm also looking into what she was up to around the time she took that rest, though…"

"Oh, sounds tough."

"Yep." She put her elbows on the table, pressing her beer can against her blushing cheeks. "But you know," she muttered with a faraway look in her eyes, "I kinda admire her."

"Huh?"

What was this chick saying…? What a moron.

She practically lit up before my apathetic gaze. Amane-chan put her beer can down with gusto, as if she was attempting to slap the table with it. She began to talk feverishly, her eyes sparkling.

"You know those tragic, beautiful girls? They're kinda sickly, but they work so hard it's inspiring. Boys are weak to that type, y'know? I'm, like, the complete opposite, so no one will give me the time of day…"

As she spoke, my sister threw herself down on the sofa and stared fixatedly at her legs. The long, supple legs that emerged from the hot pants she wears at home could not be described as sickly by any stretch of the imagination. My sister might not have fit the tragic image, but that was hardly the only appealing trait in women.

"…Uh, that's not really how it is, you know? You give off the vibe of a ripe woman," I said.

Amane-chan sat up straight, blushing with happiness for some reason. Since her hair was ruffled from throwing herself on the sofa, she ran a comb through it just for good measure.

"Y-You think?" She looked at me through upturned eyes.

"Well, if you're too ripe, you just ferment."

"Fur meant? What does that have to do with anythi—oh. You meant *that* kind of ripe! Shuddup, you… you…!"

As soon as the meaning dawned on her, my sister kicked at me with her long legs. Even though it didn't hurt a bit, I didn't think much of her habit of blowing up at the slightest provocation. Nobody likes a violent heroine.

After flailing around like a grumpy cat and kicking me again, Amane-chan seemed to brighten up somewhat, because she sat up straight and let out a sigh.

"Man, your personality really sucks."

"I'm a product of my environment…"

A boy with an upbeat older sister is almost 100% guaranteed to end up with a twisted personality. That's my theory. If the older sister was trying to learn karate, her brother would end up battered and bruised for the sake of practice. If she said she wanted to try cooking, he'd be the human guinea pig. She'd turn anything he bought into their shared property without so much as a "by your leave". And to top it off, if he appealed directly to their mother about this terrible state of affairs, he'd meet a terrible retribution later on. There was no way he couldn't end up with a twisted personality.

Well, it wasn't all bad. Thanks to her, I had no illusions about the female kind. No matter how outwardly beautiful a girl was, underneath it all she was just like my sister, Kusaoka Amane. That awful truth about women had been imprinted on me from a very early age.

Even now, Amane-chan was sitting cross-legged in front of the TV, beer can in one hand and squid jerky in the other, guffawing at the screen. This was the twenty-four year old single woman in her natural habitat. How could you have illusions about women after seeing that?

You get the picture. As we were arguing vehemently about the reasons I'd turned out this way, my cell phone suddenly began to vibrate. Yet another push notification for a new event in one of my mobile games, huh? Or maybe an update? Bonus stones being distributed as an apology for a glitch in *Puzzle & Dragons*? Picking myself up from the carpet, I reached my hand towards my cell phone.

When I looked at the screen, it was showing something from the messaging app, which I hadn't used in ages. According to the push notification, the name of the sender was displayed as "JOHANNE ♡".

…Johanne? I had no idea who that was. I wondered if this was spam. These days, you don't just get spam, you get movie announcements and ads and even texts announcing the end of the world. You even hear these things in the neighbourhood all the time: "THE LORD HAS COME! REPENT!" It's annoying.

Well, only a spammer would send me a message on this app. I had never told anyone about my account to begin with. It's just that… well. "If I don't get this, I'll never be able to contact my friends," I said as I cheerfully installed the app on the first day of high school, only to never to use it except for the occasional chat with the public *Pretty Cure* account and to buy anime-type stamps I never intend to use.

There was no way a stranger could follow me. I have my parents to thank for that. Because of what they taught me, I've always refused to mingle with people I don't know well, so before I knew it I had become someone without friends who acted friendly to me.

I didn't feel like looking at a message from a random-ass stranger. I promptly blocked the number and stuffed my cell phone into my pocket.

After a short while, however, my cell phone started vibrating again. As much as I tried to ignore it, the vibrating sound a phone makes even on silent mode really got on my nerves.

Amane-chan threw a slightly irritated glare in my direction and tutted in casual disapproval. "Hey, that buzzing's been going on for a while and it's annoying."

"…Yeah."

God damn it, I blocked you already, you persistent bastard. Once again, I took out my phone, and when I got a good look at the contents of the message, I shuddered.

Haruma

Dear Kusaoka Haruma-san,

Hello, this is Chigusa Yuu! I'm from the year below you. I'd like to thank you kindly for listening to me on the roof today ♡

Kusaoka-san, I see you're a second year student! Your seat number is the same as mine! While our houses might be some distance away from each other, at least our birthdays are close! Oh, oh, and did I mention that we have the same blood type? ♡ This must be fate, don't you think? *laughs*

Oh, I also heard that you often spend your breaks playing mobile games. I'm also super interested in those sport(?)-like games, so you'll have to teach me how to play next time, if that's all right with you ♡

Er, um, you know how you said I could talk to you anytime? The truth is, there's something I really want to talk to you about *sweats*. Kusaoka-san, do you know about the Random Crossroad?? It seems like my friend got caught up in that urban legend… What do I do? I'm scaaared *cries*.

Won't you lend me your assistance and help me find my precious friend so that she won't be left alone to die?!

I eagerly await your response *bows* ♡

Haruma

What do I do? I'm scaaared *cries*.

My phone continued to shudder even as I was reading the message, and by the time I was halfway through, I was shuddering myself.

In total, I received over twenty messages, all likely from the same person. After I had initially blocked "JOHANNE ♡", she

changed her account to “JOHANNE ♪”, “JOHANNE ☆” and “JOHANNE 2”, slipping through my blocking manoeuvre with a manoeuvre of her own. Now I was on the receiving end of a bunch of messages. If I just let things be, she might have ended up warping into “JOHANNevolution” or “the end of genesis JOHANNevolution turbo type D”.

And don’t even get me started on the contents of the message itself.

Love hearts and symbols were all well and good. The writing also had a pleasant girly vibe. But you see, I really don’t think that casually beating someone over the head with their address, date of birth and blood type is a good idea. Just when did the Personal Information Protection Act get amended? Or was she exercising a right to know?

As I clenched my cell phone tighter, my sister peered at me with a mystified expression.

“Something the matter?”

Everything is the matter with this sender. Sis, this is serious! was all I could think.

I coughed. “Amane-chan,” I called out to her.

“What?”

“When a girl says, ‘We have the same blood type,’ what does she mean?” I asked.

Amane-chan gnawed on her squid jerky and thought for a while.

“…It means she wants to have a blood transfusion.”

Wow, really? You learn something new every day. Just what you'd expect from a health teacher. I had no idea I was being invited to donate blood. Wait, hang on a second. My sister might have been saying that with a straight face, but she couldn't have been serious…

Well, I'd always known my sis was a bit kooky, but this "Johanne" sender fit the bill as well. When you think about it logically, no one would send a giddy message like this if they were right in the head. My image of Chigusa Yuu didn't quite match up with this psycho message, but seeing as it mentioned the events on the roof, I had no choice but to believe that this signature was hers.

When I thought about it, Chigusa Yuu did have the beauty of a jewel, physically speaking. She was a diamond among beauties. But you know, I have to say no to a Crazy Diamond.

As I was frantically blocking her, the intercom rang. *Ding dong.*

Amane-chan ignored it completely and went on guffawing at the TV. Meanwhile, the ringing continued. *Ding dong. Ding dong.*Damn it, what is it? Quit calling out to me so much. Are you Smile, you bastard?1

"…Haruma," Amane-chan called out my name, clicking her tongue in irritation. Predictably enough, it seemed she was unable to stand the ringing any longer.

Well, that's the way it goes. Between older sisters and younger brothers, you don't even need to think about who tops the hierarchy. Younger brothers are equivalent to slaves. I mean,

look at the proof. Don't "brother" and "slave" sort of resemble each other in English? They don't, do they.

Reluctantly, I stood up and peered at the monitor of the intercom, which was still ringing incessantly. But no one was there. Someone had to be there—that person just didn't show up on the camera for some reason.

It's a strong trend among people trying to solicit or get money from you! Watch out, kids!

The way things were going, I had no choice but to actually go out to the entrance. I tried peering through the peephole just in case, but since the caller was predictably nowhere to be seen, I gave up and turned the knob.

When I opened the door warily, only just far enough to bring my head out, this peculiar character (presumably the visitor) stepped up and bowed.

"Good evening."

"Er, right. Evening…" was all I could answer with.

Her manner was so elegant it would have sounded totally fitting if she had followed up her greeting with, "What a pleasant night this is." As Chigusa Yuu flicked her glistening black hair over her shoulder, bathed in the glow from the street lights, an ethereal smile came over her face like a wintry crescent moon. Try as I might, I could not connect the person in front of me with the maniac who had been pressing away at the intercom.

"Um, this is my house," I said with a hoarse voice. "So why—?"

"You said I could come talk to you anytime, so here I am," Chigusa explained bashfully.

The way she blushed and glanced up at me from time to time through upturned eyes was very cute and all, but her explanation left something to be desired… The reason for her visit was a mystery, yes, but what I wanted to ask was not why she had come but more like why she knew where my house was. What, did this girl use a nineties Hello Pages? Did they disclose one's personal residence that easily?2

"That's not what I—"

"Ah, perhaps you still haven't read my message?" She came to a startled realisation. "I'll send it to you now, all right?"

She started pressing away at her smart phone. Right after that, my phone vibrated. There on the screen was the exact same message I had seen before. When I caught sight of the word "talk", my eyes froze.

Come to think of it, I had indeed said *come talk to me again*.

But in Japanese, when you say "See you next time!" or "Let's hang out again sometime!" it means you won't meet again. "I'll go if I'm able" means the same thing as "I won't go" in Japanese.

When you're able to pay lip service to everyone that way, you can live the high life and become a total celeb.

"Mm. Um, when I said come talk to me, I didn't mean that, I, um…"

"You don't have time to spare for me?" Chigusa interrupted me with a hollow laugh, slipping her hands into her pockets.

All of a sudden, I caught myself smiling like a Japanese person when a foreigner talks to him in another language. *Oh, sorry… I cannotto spikku foreign ranguage.*

1 The Japanese onomatopoeia for a ringing doorbell is pronounced 'pin pon', which is the same as the word for 'ping pong'. Smile is one of the main characters from the 2014 anime *Ping Pong the Animation.*

2 The Hello Pages is a phone and address book distributed by the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (NTT), similar to the White Pages. It lists private addresses, but only a very small number of them are listed on the Hello Pages these days.

Yuu

Kusaoka-san was smiling in satisfaction.

His facial features were… well, let's not go there, but even so, his expression conveyed his emotions to me loud and clear.

OH, YESYES… *I kyan yes-u, I am-u yes-u!* I wondered if he was the son of a god. He might just bring salvation to man through his bountiful love.

"You don't have time to spare for me?"

When I laughed, Kusaoka-san's smile deepened further. Just as I hoped, he had been expecting my arrival. Having whispered *come talk to me* in my ears, he had likely made adequate preparations. The words "I'll go if I'm able" are the same thing as a contract: "Even if the possibility that I can go is only one per cent, I'll definitely go!" If you are well aware that a verbal promise is legally valid, you too may build a fortune in the business world and live a life of comfort, boys and girls.

“Since I have time to spare and you have time to spare, Kusaoka-san, then that means that there are no obstacles between us, does it not?”

“Does it now?”

“Have you time to spare?”

“Do I look like it?”

“Are you able to go?”

“Do I look like it?”

However, Kusaoka-san was an expert at turning the tables. Nothing I did could sway him into making any promises. It was entirely a waste of effort. Without the physical strength to push him forcefully, I lacked the courage to go on the offensive.

Beautiful and perfect as I may be, by no means do I have absolute confidence in my ability to communicate. No matter how well I present myself, I will shake and tremble if I see no favourable response forthcoming, and if I perceive signs of an outright rejection, my heart is wounded.

“…I’m not a bother to you, am I?”

I am such a cry baby. Even though I am repulsed by that part of myself, there is nothing I can do to stop it. My vision blurred with tears. What a weakling I am.

“I thought if anyone would listen to my story, it would be you, Kusaoka-san…”

“I get it already! I’ll listen!”

Kusaoka-san really was the reincarnation of the Messiah. His large palms, characteristic of a boy, spread even wider in an effort to alleviate my tears.

Kusaoka-san was such a nice person.

Haruma

Chigusa’s words were unfailingly polite.

Pulling out her hands which she had been ruffling in her pockets, she held them neatly in front of her body and bowed. As she went through the motions, I found myself thinking that Chigusa's bashful face was honestly very flattering.

I'll be blunt. This girl was adorable.

Pretty much no guy ever would get a bad feeling when a cute girl asks a favour of him. Being relied upon by a beautiful girl is the best thing that can happen to a guy.

For example, when a girl looks at you with puppy dog eyes and leans forward with her hands pressed together in a way that emphasises her chest—or alternatively, when a high-handed tsundere says stuff like, "I-It can't be helped, so I'll let you assist me! Be grateful!"—a guy will usually respond readily. As for the requests themselves, there are a bunch of variations to how they're carried out.

Type A) A request

Type B) An entreaty

Type C) A businesslike transaction

Type D) A demand

Type E) An order

Now then, here's a question! Which category did our favourite Chigusa Yuu—the most beautiful, most refined, most pure and sweet girl on the planet—fall into? This is an easy one!

The correct answer is… intimidation. None of the above!

As a smile spread across every inch of her face, Chigusa held a personal alarm in her tiny palms. The ball chain seemed to

sparkle as she brought it out. This had gone well past intimidation and into the realm of barbarism.

"…I'm not a bother to you, am I?"

Chigusa's eyes started welling up with tears. The alarm chain started making a tinkling sound. If she pulled that chain, the alarm would blare and policemen would probably come running from all directions.

As much as it was our own business, this did look like a case of an unsavoury-looking guy with a crying girl. No matter what the truth of the matter was, I would be the bad guy, the villain. I could have the best lawyer in the world and he still wouldn't be able to come up with a good defence!

Chigusa lowered her eyes sorrowfully and hugged herself tightly. As you might expect, she was still holding the alarm in one hand.

"I thought if anyone would listen to my story, it would be you, Kusaoka-san…"

"I get it already! I'll listen! In fact, I'm all ears! Say whatever you want!"

Chigusa's face lit up at my words, and she *finally* put away the personal alarm. Who would have thought a high school girl's personal alarm would serve the same purpose as the yakuza's extortion tools…?

"Thank you ever so much. Now then… There are quite a few things I'd prefer not to say at a place like this, so let us be off." Chigusa smiled cheerfully as she wiped away her tears and

pointed down the road. Don't say *a place like this*… This is my house, damn it.

Yet for all that, I had no right to refuse. Not only had she bombarded me with my personal information, she held the power of life and death over me as far as society was concerned. Once I shut up and nodded meekly, Chigusa smiled from the bottom of her heart in a way that one would not think possible of a girl who had been threatening me just a moment ago.

When I saw her smile, my heart skipped a beat.

I should mention that sweat started pouring off me, my breathing hitched and my lips turned purple. These were the early symptoms of shock, weren't they? Just from looking at her, I couldn't help but think that this could be… love!

There was not one shred of similarity between Chigusa Yuu's outward appearance and her actual actions. On top of that, she seemed to act as if nothing was the matter at all. There was something deeply unsettling about the fact that only her face was amazingly cute.

I'll be blunt. This girl… was strange.

~An Apology~

Important Notice for MOL Burger Customers

We sincerely thank you for your regular patronage.

Due to the blockade in the Strait of Malacca, the transportation of our products will be in disarray for one hour.

The production numbers will be adjusted and provisioned accordingly.

We apologise for the inconvenience and hope for your understanding.

Management

Chapter 4
Yuu

What makes society tick?

When the question is posed that way, the answer is rather obvious.

Human society is otherwise known as the spirit of mutual cooperation.

Everything in the world—be it the insurance system, infrastructure or even perhaps disaster relief—is built upon a system of mutual aid. If humans only ever grabbed or stole what they wanted, their development as a species would not have been feasible. People have built society by leaning on each other's shoulders.

So what were Kusaoka-san and I, then? As we waited for the pedestrian lights to change, I cocked my head in vague confusion.

The sunset-stained rotary was teeming with commuters. In the heart of our city, there was a giant station terminal, which ran all eight railways, including the private lines, the subways and the JR. Flanked by a flagship department store on one side and the head office of a home electronics emporium on the other, our bustling business district was renowned throughout the country for being built upon the foundations of both the East and West. It was a hive of activity at any given time of the day, from the crack of dawn to the dead of the night.

It was a world run by greedy capitalist logic, totally divorced from the concept of mutual aid.

In the midst of all this, I glanced up at the person beside me. The boy who had followed me, wordlessly responding to my cry for help.

"Kusaoka-san, would you say that we have a cooperative relationship?"

"I'd say that, given the circumstances, the only thing we have between us is an evil plot…"

"Hm?"

"Oh, nothing."

"…I see. I am a little worried. I don't suppose it's a good feeling to keep on giving to others without expecting anything in return."

"Don't worry. I don't think it's possible to feel any worse than this."

"…So you *are* a little bothered, aren't you?"

To that, there was no response. With a peculiarly thin smile on his face, Kusaoka-san walked on silently. Had my voice been swallowed by the crowd? No, that couldn't be it. We were close enough for him to hear me clearly.

I wondered if he disliked me. If I had not been the object of consideration, I might have seriously considered that possibility. Nevertheless, in a conversation pertaining to the subtleties of the heart, he had pretended to ignore my voice. That could only mean one thing.

He was no doubt enraptured by my beauty. In all likelihood, he had no wish to suffer the pain of rejection. Oh, men. They come in all shapes and sizes, but every one of them is stubborn as can be.

From the very moment he first called out to me, I somehow knew. Kusaoka-san's face was that of a young man head over heels in love at first sight. There was no other way a horrid face like that could belong to a human being.

As a woman blessed with rare intellect and beauty, I had more experience in these matters than most. The number of times

someone had asked me out exceeded the number of stars in the sky. Unfortunately, however, I had yet to give my okay to anyone.

Being a beautiful girl had its occasional downsides.

If I sold my face to the opposite sex, I would purchase an equal amount of displeasure from my own sex. Given that the market was inherently just, that particular transaction was a matter of fairness in a closed school society. Among the things I had some knowledge of, the capitalist world of love certainly ranked among them.

I merely wished to go out with someone who is my equal, for I was a timid and weak person at heart. Simply the thought of performing an equal transaction with someone far less intelligent and refined than myself filled me with unstoppable shivers. Instead of thoughtlessly and unfairly aiming for someone beyond their reach, I would much prefer it if they raised themselves to my level.

However.

"I have no idea what you think of me, Kusaoka-san, but I am a human being. If I make someone feel bad, I feel bad as well," I insisted slowly.

Kusaoka-san cast a glance at me, his mouth still closed.

Indeed. At first glance, Chigusa Yuu might seem a tad—well, *extremely* adorable, but her heart was that of a normal girl's. Even if his feelings themselves were impossible for me to respond to, I was compelled to ask what the matter was. I was deeply concerned with those human feelings.

One good turn deserves another—that is an inviolable rule.

According to my younger sister, boys were extremely fond of cute girls who ask them for favours. That being the case, Kusaoka-san must have experienced a great thrill from my request. I might have

entered these investigations to fulfil my own objective, but he was a total outsider. He was engaged in the pursuit of happiness—a downright hedonist, so to speak.

"Kusaoka-san, wouldn't you say that I gave more to you, strictly speaking?"

"Huh?" Kusaoka-san blurted out as if he had been caught off-guard.

"However, you needn't worry yourself over it. I am not the type of person to be concerned about transactions that do not involve cash."

"…Impressive. I have transactions on my mind all the time, so we have zilch in common." Apparently deeply moved, Kusaoka-san let out a deep sigh in the very middle of the pedestrian crossing, where the surging crowd of people had started to move. "So what do I have to do to go home?"

"When we finish our intel-gathering investigation. We were supposed to meet up at the MOL Burger at the end of the—oof!"

One of the people crossing the road must have hit me with their bag. *Bam.*

I felt pressure against my back, causing my knees to buckle involuntarily.

Slowly, gradually, the pain spread throughout my entire body.

"Ouch…"

Everything turned blurry. Tears began to spring unbidden from my eyes. I really was such a crybaby. At times like these, I was keenly aware of my own powerlessness.

There was nothing I could really do, but if I could just see for myself who had hit me—

It happened the moment I attempted to turn around meekly.

“—It’s all right, so just stand up already.”

“Huh?”

“Hurry up and finish so we can go home.”

Wow!

Someone was pulling on my arm and helping me to my feet. A shiver rolled down my spine—he was even stronger than whoever had knocked me over.

The boy who had pulled me so forcibly was the universal female fantasy. Of course, I, being the pinnacle of womanhood, was no exception when it came to such fantasies.

Frantically, I wiped the corners of my eyes with my palms. I ducked my head.

“… Er, um… Thank you very much.”

“You don’t have to bow. I just wanna go home already.”

When I looked up, Kusaoka-san was looking away as if nothing had happened. Peculiarly enough, his curt profile appeared like sparkling neon to me.

“Your points just went up, Haruma-san.”

“What points…?”

“Oh dear, don’t make a girl say it.” I raised a finger.

For all his strength, he was such a shy boy. He merely shrugged in embarrassment. The sheer gap between his appearance and actions was making his points climb even higher!

When my Johannes points filled up, I would give the other person a fighting chance to have dinner with me. Kusaoka-san really was lucky that I was lengthening his date with such a wonderful girl. I would get a free meal out of it too, so I was very happy myself. The point system kills two birds with one stone!

I conceived all these policies in order to make everyone happy, so perhaps I am well suited towards the politician's trade. If my objective was to save money, then plunging into the world of politics was certainly one option. I would do anything to change Japan, my beloved homeland, into a better place.

Haruma

I'm not a gentleman or a feminist.

It's just that, when Chigusa fell over, she promptly tried to use the cell phone in her hand to snap a photo of the person who had bumped into her, so I figured I should intervene. She didn't even bother to sniffle or wipe any tears; she just went straight to work. Was she a lawyer on the inside or what?

Since the passersby were buzzing with interest, I promptly grabbed Chigusa's arm and left the place pronto.

…Chigusa's arm was thin as a rake.

Still, it wasn't particularly bony, and I could feel its softness through her clothing. If I kept holding onto Chigusa, my sweaty hand would draw a map of Japan on her uniform, so I hastily let go after a few steps. Now that I had put some distance between us, I was at a loss about what to do, so I opened my mouth.

"Anyway, where are we headed?"

"We're going to MOL Burger, Haruma-san."

Why was this chick calling me by my first name? Because my points had gone up? In that case, I wondered if I should call her by the nickname I came up with: Johannes. However, there was not a single atom of desire in me to raise her Johannes points… In that case, calling her Chigusa was probably the best option,

although ‘Chibusa’ kinda fit her, embarrassing though it may be1! I’m your typical shy adolescent boy.

So, yeah. That was why I kept on talking without calling Chigusa by her name.

“If you’re talking about food, then I’ve already eaten.”

“I’m not. I’m going to listen to Anna-san’s story,” Chigusa said as if nothing was more obvious, despite the fact that I had no idea who the hell Anna-san was. A hit song from Kai Band?

Anyway, it was kind of a bad call to make an appointment with this Anna-san before checking with my schedule. Not to mention Chigusa was acting under the assumption that I would follow her…

Was there a girl out there who could put up with an attractive, self-centered female like Chigusa? A chick like Chigusa would promptly get shunned and ignored in female society, and if she turned up to school her desk would be full of graffiti. Well, some of them had to find utility value in a pretty face alone. I wondered if this Anna-chan we were about to meet would fit that mold.

Lagging a few steps behind Chigusa, I walked through a town weighed down by the darkness of the night. Maybe it was because we were strung along by the rush hour crowd on their way home, but despite our physical proximity there was no conversation to be had between us, and a sort of restless feeling came over me.

Out of lack of anything better to do, I pulled out my smartphone. After I touched the screen a few times, my eyes fell upon Chigusa's message for a second time.

However… the more I looked at it, the creepier it seemed. Wow. Just from reading the text casually, I could tell it was terrifying, awful and downright spine-chilling, like something straight from the horror genre. *Thrill, shock, suspense.* Every time I read it, a few more months were shaved off my lifespan.

From that horrifying message, one phrase in particular caught my eye: "Random Crossroad." It was like something from *The Twilight Zone.*

"She got wrapped up in the Random Crossroad and disappeared, huh…" I muttered to myself, unable to restrain a snort at this completely implausible story.

I wasn't too familiar with this Random Crossroad thing. It had something to do with an urban legend, but not only was no one around me spouting rumours, there was no one around me full stop.

I must have a natural genius for Nen or something. How else could I have learned Zetsu out of the blue…? In fact, even the author of that manga is using Zetsu. He's been nullifying his presence too much!

Well, anyway, if I didn't sort out the problem at hand, I wouldn't be able to go home. I would solve Chigusa's dilemma if possible, and if that proved to be difficult, I would have to come up with a due response that she would be able to accept.

I coughed a few times. “Hey, Chigusa,” I called out to her. “Can I ask about the specifics of your problem?”

In response, Chigusa folded her arms behind her back and turned around. The hem of her skirt fluttered lightly, allowing me to catch a glimpse of her creamy white thighs.

“The specifics, you ask?” Chigusa tilted her head and hummed in thought. “Hmm… Shia-san was someone I got along really well with. She has a miniature Schnauzer and lives with her older brother and parents in an apartment building two stations away from school, and at school she was learning rhythmic gymnastics because of her mother’s influence, but she can’t handle chopsticks or rods, let alone a baton, and she couldn’t even catch the baton her mother gave her, and not to mention her grades are not exactly the best—she’s only slightly above average—and in the midst of all those problems, she started hanging out with bad classmates, so her grades have been falling even more, and recently she’s been gallivanting about as much as she can, so her parents and even her brother these days are worrying about whether she really has her heart set on her entrance exams, it seems.”

“O-Okay…”

As extremely delighted as I was with the long-winded explanation, who the hell was Shia-chan? Some kind of butter? What? (Hey, if she was made of butter, her skin would be moist.)

Anyway, I didn’t want to know the specifics about this Shia-chan—I wanted to ask about the Random Crossroad… And seriously, that was too much information.

I gave Chigusa a nonplussed look, but she only sighed and went on talking, her voice faint yet fervent.

"…Shia-san is a trusted friend who shares something very important with me. That is why I absolutely must bring her back," Chigusa said with a straight face. Her feverish eyes were filled with undeniable sorrow.

"Well, yeah, it'd be kinda worrying if she never came back…"

"Indeed. The thought of it left me worried sick… She wasn't there when I rang her doorbell, and she never answered my calls at all yesterday even though I phoned her all night…"

Chigusa sniffed and dabbed the corner of her eyes. When viewed in a vacuum, that gesture of hers was adorable as hell and stirred up protective feelings in me, but the stuff in her message from before combined with what she was actually saying now sounded far more harrowing…

Even Chigusa, however, had it in her to show concern. "If it comes to pass that she never returns, it will be a crushing loss for me," she said with even more vehemence. "Just imagining that she was wrapped up in an incident caused by some organisation behind the scenes fills my heart with agony."

As I watched Chigusa clench the ribbon on her chest, looking as if the end of the world was coming, I couldn't help but think that, her bizarre actions aside, I wouldn't mind helping her with this particular problem.

"Well, you know…" I struggled to find what to say. "Anyway, I just wanted to know about the Random Crossroad."

Chigusa tilted her head in confusion and pulled a face as if she was having a date with an armadillo.

"…Random Crossroad?"

"Um, from your message, you know."

Huh? It wasn't the Random Crossroad? Maybe it was the Gundam X-road? Name-wise, it was pretty SD Gundam-ish.

"Ah, that?" Chigusa said with a strange giggle, at which point she launched into a tentative-sounding explanation filled with "ums" and "uhs". Er, wasn't *she* the one who approached me about it in the first place…?

The Random Crossroad.

It is said that if you walk down the residential area at midnight holding hands with your lover, a fourth road appears at the end of the T-junction. There is no way of knowing which path is the right way. If you choose the wrong path at that point, you may never return—or something like that.

…Was she an idiot? It sounded like something a brain-dead middle schooler would come up with. *If you choose the wrong path, you may never return…*

What the hell, man?

What was that—a metaphor for life? Did it represent the adolescent maiden heart, torn between choices and agonising over where to go?

There must be countless people who have picked the wrong path and found themselves unable to turn back no matter how much they regretted it.

That was me in a nutshell. Right now, I was itching to turn back and head home.

In my opinion, people who are good at socialising have never found the right occasion to go home. The ability to impose on others is probably an essential feature of communication, the heart of human relations. Alternatively, you could say that the dark side of human relations, sociability, communication, etc. involves removing the very existence of other people.

Just like what Chigusa Yuu did.

"Haruma-san, come this way."

Even now, Chigusa was power-walking ahead of me, completely oblivious to my thoughts. Passersby looked over their shoulders at her from time to time, but it seemed that even the city bustle failed to reach her ears. She ploughed through the stream of people pouring out of the station and eventually reached a building at the front. As she got on the elevator there, Chigusa heaved a sigh. After pressing the button to go to the second floor, Chigusa took a step back and stood with her legs pressed together like a proper lady, glaring at the door as if expecting it to open any second.

Only Chigusa and I were inside that tiny box. Naturally, the two of us were physically closer than we had ever been.

…It was somehow nerve-wracking.

Now that I thought about it, it had been an awfully long time since I had last spoken to a girl from my school. Also, if we were meeting up outside of school hours, did that mean this was a date? If I inhabited the same space as a girl, then it was no

exaggeration to say that, in a broad sense, we were cohabitating…

1 'Chibusa' roughly means 'tits'.

Yuu

On the second floor of MOL Burger, at a seat in a dimly lit corner.

In that inconspicuous little spot, a petite girl sat with her shoulders hunched.

"Excuse me, have I kept you waiting?" I walked over, waving brightly.

In response, she shook her head sharply twice or thrice. She was peering at us with wide eyes.

"Um, this is Haruma-san, who agreed to lend his assistance with my investigation. And this is my friend Anna-san."

"… Mhmm." With a withdrawn response that would put a tortoise to shame, Kusaoka-san took a seat as politely as he possibly could.

Then there was Anna-san.

A fellow first year student, she was the youngest of three sisters. She was a Gemini and her blood type was B, not the sort of combination one would imagine befits someone engaged in handicrafts, but there you have it. She lived with her parents, who used a loaned car. She never fell behind with her tax repayments.

Her receipts and bonds were minor. However, her parents had strict control over her. She owed thirty-six thousand four hundred yen to my finances. Her dimples were her most charming feature.

Today, however, her dimples had vanished into thin air, replaced by a cold sweat. "Er, um, Yuu-chan… I'm just wondering why you called me here…"

"There is something I want to ask you, if you may."

Anna-san had readily responded to my summons, even during a busy time slot in the evening. It was no exaggeration to call her my soul sister.

"You are aware that plenty of my friends have gone missing lately, aren't you? Anna-san, I was wondering if you got along well with Shia-san. Is there nothing you can tell me? Anything you know will do."

"…Um, you know, the three of us—Shia, Maria and I—we usually, well, last Sunday we were hanging out…" After taking a seat next to me, Anna-san merely stared intently at her shaking fingertips. It was almost as if her shaking could generate electricity. Such a convenient body would sell for quite a lot of money. "That's why I tried asking Maria about Shia on the phone."

"Go on."

"But something terrible must have happened to Maria, because she sounded so shaken earlier…"

"Ah, poor thing. By the way, why do you bring that up now?"

"Oh, no reason!" She shook her head frantically. How adorable she was, just like a small rabbit.

When it comes to human relationships, the three F's are a necessity: Flatter, frighten and follow. Only then can communication be sustained. An extremely weak-willed and timid person like me has only ever resorted to flattery, however.

"Anna-san, you're so cute. You can do it!"

As I cheered her on smilingly, Anna-san's lips trembled to such an extent that her chin threatened to unhinge.

One of the reasons I had asked Kusaoka-san to lend me his assistance was so that he could pressure the person I was questioning if she happened to resist, but it seemed that she was

willing to tell all without him having to do anything. Oh my, did that mean I had no need of him? In a sense, sharing space with a worthless male is already worth a nominal fee or charge, is it not?

"…It's not a big deal, so tell us everything you've realised, okay?" Kusaoka-san said curtly across the table, not wasting a moment.

The ideal girl, both beautiful and kind. He must be inspired to show off his best side to such a wonderful girl. Somehow, I cannot look down on someone who takes actions with savings and stockpiling in mind.

"I-I wasn't really planning this or anything, but I heard something once from Shia," Anna-san spoke up, her face still taut. "She said she was suffering because she was paying back Yuu-chan's intere-"

"Oh, dear me."

In my carelessness, I spilt my cup on the table.

The coffee, a searing hot, blackish brew that resembled despair, flew out of the cup and spread across the floor.

"I'm terribly sorry! I'm so glad you didn't make fun of me, Anna-san. That could have caused a large burn."

"R-Right…"

"Now then, what just happened? I'm a rather jumpy person, so when I hear my name spoken out of turn, my hand might shake from surprise." I cast a sideway glance at Kusaoka-san.

"Th-The tiles sure are dirty…"

There was an air of "*Oh, dearie me!*" about him as he diligently set about wiping the floor. It seemed he wasn't listening to the conversation. That was a relief. I only disclose my finance information to a limited number of people. That I am able to control my clients' information so thoroughly is proof of my excellent business practices.

"… I-I'm so sorry! I'm really sorry!" Anna-san's head flopped up and down in a surprisingly doll-like motion. It was the kind of action that made me think she had a long life ahead of her. "Er, um… Shia was worried about *someone*! Someone somewhere! She owed that person money and was in trouble over it!"

"That's quite a dilemma." I smiled gently. I do hope that people in need can swiftly turn a new leaf after they fail to observe the golden rule of humanity—that of returning borrowed money.

"So then I wondered if Shia had reached out to another loan shark."

"—Another loan shark, you say?"

I shot up to my feet in an instant, and then, being the calm and collected person that I am, I immediately cooled down. Instead, I clenched my hands into steely fists under the table.

I had predicted they would surface one day. By *they*, I mean a rival company.

Go-getters reap ample profit, but it is a fact of life that they will be overtaken as soon as they let their guard slip. There was a significant possibility that my missing clients had been taken in and persuaded of the inevitable by *their* finance business.

I had to thoroughly nip the problem in the bud and establish military rule.

"Anna-san! Do tell me more!" I leaned forward, unable to restrain myself.

"R-Really! I have no idea! Stop, really…!"

"It's okay. There are no scary people here."

"*Oooooh…*"

Much as I attempted to soothe her, Anna-san still seemed as if she was about to cry. She was like a girl on the receiving end of violent extortions from a demon from hell.

At times like these, there are people who can so easily say things like, "Talk to your parents," or "Call the police," as if they knew all about it. On the other hand, they could laugh and say, "These things happen. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

That is a truly horrible thing to say, in my opinion.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Are people aware of just how many victims have been hurt by those knowing words?

They are gripped with weakness and cultivated by fear; their very will is under someone else's control. Their hearts are tainted with despair. Who can make a proper assessment of the situation under those circumstances? As far as those base individuals are concerned, individual strength alone is insufficient to contend with the situation. That is why they are driven to seek outside assistance.

As I mulled on those thoughts, I realised: *Anna-san really could stand to be a little stronger.*

Because she was a valued friend of mine, the words *fear* and *control* did not exist between us. This kind of dynamic is rather common among friendships.

Haruma

Whoa, how dark, I thought as I scrubbed the tiles.

Of course, I wasn't talking about the coffee.

Johannes scared the shit out of me. She knocked over her cup without a single ounce of hesitation, only letting out the tiniest of peeps.

The paper napkin I had been wiping the floor with was soiled brown, and I could definitely feel its heat. I would probably get a slight burn if I touched the liquid directly. Not only that, it had made a permanent stain on Anna-chan's pure white blouse.

You'd think it would be normal to get angry when something like that happens to you, but Anna-chan was wobbling like jelly and kept apologising over and over. By the time I looked up, having finished tidying up the floor, Anna-chan was still hunched over in shame.

"So then I wondered if Shia had reached out to another loan shark."

"—Another loan shark, you say?"

There was not a flicker of surprise on Chigusa's face as she repeated those words. Her manner was exceedingly calm, but underneath the table, her hands were clenched tightly into fists. Maybe it was because she didn't really have much muscle, but I could see her arms were trembling slightly as she channelled her strength into her fists.

As far as I was concerned, it was my first time hearing that a fellow student had a loan shark, but judging from the way the two of them were talking, there was probably more than one of them. That much was easy to guess.

Given how rarely I spoke with people face-to-face, I've gotten good at inferring things from conversations between strangers. If you want to know how good I am, I'm so good that I could tell that one of the loan sharks in question was none other than Chigusa Yuu.

…I mean, at the moment, Yuu-chan's keen interest in the subject was saying it all!

That said, Chigusa herself did not seem to be aware of it, so I figured I should pretend I hadn't heard a thing… If I didn't, I might end up with coffee on me!

One should not ask questions the other party does not wish to answer.

There are two important aspects of a smooth conversation. Don't talk about things you're not asked about, and don't ask about things the other person didn't say. If you follow these two rules, arguments and conflicts are inevitably avoided. Why, there is even a possibility that conversations will never happen at all.

Feelings, perspectives and imaginary boundaries all belong to the domain of the individual. Treading upon them is nothing but infringing upon another person's territory. It's an act of war, I tell you!

This is an era in which individuals should strive for an isolationist policy for the sake of domestic expansion within their minds, I think. Yep. The principle of peace at any cost? *Non non,* this is plain old concern.

However, the girl named Chigusa Yuu did not seem to have that kind of concern on her mind. She was currently leaning forward, hounding Anna-chan for an answer. Her hand was reaching out towards her smart phone, which she had placed on the table. "Anna-san! Do tell me more!"

"R-Really! I have no idea! Stop, really…!"

Anna-chan stiffened, but Chigusa's fingertip would not leave her smart phone. Her body language was pretty much screaming: *you know what'll happen to you if you don't fess up.*

"It's okay. There are no scary people here." Chigusa beamed, causing Anna-chan's shoulders to jolt in alarm. Yep, that Johannes Smile just now was scary as hell…

More than anything, it was scary how there was someone out there who could intimidate others with a cute smile and warm words. I'd seen the art of smiling to conceal anger on TV, but smiling to threaten others had to be a new art form…

Unfortunately, Chigusa's art had left Anna-chan so frightened out of her wits that the conversation went nowhere fast.

"Who does that other loan shark happen to be? An acquaintance of yours?" I spoke up.

Anna-chan looked at me, relieved. This had to be that so-called Suspension Bridge Effect. Doesn't this mean she'll end up falling in love with me? Uh oh, spaghetti-o!

"Please tell us all the details." In a flash, Chigusa motioned to lean forward, only for Anna-chan to stiffen once again.

If this was the tone of the discussion, then it was bound to go nowhere… I wanted to hurry up and go home already…

"You don't have to tell us all the details," I said, butting my way between Chigusa and Anna-chan. "Was there anything that particularly stuck out to you?"

Scrunching up her thoughts in recollection, Anna-chan began to speak slowly and falteringly. "About two weeks ago, you see, Shia and I were talking about what we'd do about summer

swimsuits. Even though she said she was broke so there was no way she could buy any, she changed her mind altogether after school. That day, she was awfully generous with her money, and when I asked her about it, she said she got some special income…"

Oh man, I see how it is. Common sense declared that was when she got the money. The question was how she had managed to do it. That part of her story was impossible to overlook.

"How peculiar…" Chigusa spoke up suddenly, having been listening in silence. Or maybe she had been harbouring the same misgivings as I did. She was the same smiling girl as ever, but at that moment, there was a strange twinkle in her eyes. I could even see that she was angry, judging by the prickly atmosphere that had suddenly come over the table.

Guessing that she must have hit a sore spot, Anna-chan hastily chimed in agreement. "Y-Yeah… There's no one else who could have lent money to Shia, but—"

Chigusa interrupted her. "I think that, before treating someone else, she ought to return what she borrowed. There are other things that ought to take precedence in the mind of any good citizen. However, Shia-san is peculiar in the he—I mean, she might have the wrong idea about things.

As a friend, I may need to have a long and thorough talk with her about this."

Oh, so *that's* what she meant…

But you know, Johannes. I think you're really not one to talk, given how peculiar you are! Didn't Chigusa spin the story just like one of those Yazuka or shady businessmen?

"If this happened after school, then she must have gotten the money from inside the school," I said. "That's the weird part."

"…Is that really so peculiar?"

"Sure it is… Don't you know what a school is for?"

"It is a place that forces you to come into contact with people whom one would certainly never be involved with by one's own volition. It is a regressive cancer against the proper order. However, when it comes to the exchange of money, the financial system still functions better than the shambles of hierarchy," Chigusa said matter-of-factly, her face completely straight.

"Um, okay. Right… moving on."

This should go without saying, but schools aren't supposed to function like banks. It was perfectly reasonable to wonder how someone could perform money dealings in spite of that. Plus, you don't casually stumble across people who think screwing high school kids out of their money is a great thing to do. But the thing was that Chigusa wasn't the only one… Seriously, I was wondering what went on in the heads of those wannabe loan sharks.

Well, it takes one to know one. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's. I'd have to look at it from the gospel according to the loan shark Johannes-kun.

I mean, there was no use harping on about this chick's sense of morals. I couldn't even understand a normal person's point of view. That applies even more to people who lack common sense.

So I might as well enjoy talking to Anna-chan, who was supposedly the sane one!

"So, do you know where this Shia-chan person came from?"

"Indeed, it is as Haruma-san said. Do you happen to know where Shia-san went that day? If you know that as well as the amount she received and the interest, I would like to know in detail." Chigusa had only meant to speak to Anna-chan like a normal person, but once again she barged her way forward.

Anna-chan flinched, as if taken aback by Chigusa's intensity. "I don't know the amount or interest, but I think she was in the student counselling room, maybe… When we were meeting up just before we went shopping, that's the direction she was walking from…"

The student counselling room was on the first floor of the school building. It was a small room situated not far from the centre entrance. Supposedly, it was used for providing guidance to students as the name suggested, but since many students at our school had impeccable grades, I didn't usually see people coming in and out of that place.

Next to the student counselling room was the staffroom. The two rooms were connected in the middle, so it was the kind of arrangement where you could easily move from one room to the other.

When I was in my first year, a busybody teacher called me to the student counselling room and said, “Is anything weighing you down? You’re not getting bullied or anything?” The passionate, heartwarming counselling I received from him left me with a very strong impression. Wait, wasn’t the teacher acting solely to cover his own ass? Bad memories…

“The door over there wasn’t locked, though, was it?” Come to think of it, the teacher took his sweet time coming over that time when I was called over, so I remember having to wait around in the hallway for twenty minutes or so.

“I don’t think so… but I suppose maybe it kind of looked like she was coming from that direction or something…” replied Anna-chan in a less than confident tone. As she hummed in thought, her words progressively made less and less sense. Well, I did hear that eyewitness accounts of accidents are fairly unreliable…

“Most students can’t go in there. There’s a chance she came from some other place,” I said to Anna-chan, intended to nudge her thinking towards another approach.

At that moment, a voice came flying out of left field.

“No. If she had a key, that would invalidate the conditions of the closed room.”

“Huh?”

When I swung around at the sudden interjection, Chigusa had placed a finger to her lips, waggling it the way people did when unravelling a logic puzzle.

"Think about it. As long as you have a key, anyone can enter. If there is a door, then I don't think you can call it a closed room at that point in time."

I sighed. "You're right."

I found myself agreeing with that incredibly simple yet lucid response. It made sense. A real closed room was a box without any connecting points. If those conditions weren't satisfied, then a way to enter the room had to exist.

The way Chigusa saw things made me wonder if she was from a different species. Just what you'd expect from someone lacking common sense… How did good ol' Johannes manage to end up on the rooftop when it was off-limits anyway? That just proved my point.

Still, I was gripped by what Chigusa said: *as long as you have a key.*

The teachers were in charge of keys to the student counselling room, along with the year-level coordinators and the vice-principal. It was normal to see them going inside. Well, it wasn't like someone *couldn't* use a fake key, skeleton key or picklock, but that was a whole new can of worms. The first order of business was to lock onto a possibility and think about it. At this point in time, that was enough.

I'd asked what I wanted to ask, so I looked in Chigusa's direction, channeling my desire to head home (*"I wonder if I can go home now" "Wish I could go home" "I'm tired. Gonna yawn"*) into my eyes. Chigusa was smiling brilliantly.

"Anna-san, thank you ever so much for telling us your story."

All of a sudden, Chigusa bowed politely, leaving Anna-chan bewildered. “Er, um, uh, sure…”

From the way Chigusa was talking, she was totally wrapping things up. *Awwright! I can go home!* I thought, half-rising to my feet, only for Chigusa to yank my blazer sleeve.

“We’re only just getting started. I wonder how far the rumours about a black market in the student counselling room have spread. Given that it was not in my information network, it must not have been advertised through word of mouth, but in that case I wonder how the business could grow. Are they charging more per customer or relying on repeat clients? Just what kind of business model are they using?”

“I-I have no idea…”

“I cannot permit a lack of ideas! Anna-san, what do you think about offering to be a customer? This is a matter of responsibility!” Chigusa pressed Anna-chan, prompting the girl to start shaking all over again.

Her frenzied babbling was confusing, incoherent and served no use whatsoever. Not this shit again… Even reading the notices on the tray’s sheet seemed like less of a waste of time.

“…I’m gonna get some coffee,” I announced, before crawling my way to the counter, dragging my feet every step of the way.

Yuu

I spent an hour coaxing her after that, but in the end, Anna-san hardly said anything at all. For now, I decided to cut her debt balance to a mere 36,000 yen. Anna-san was crying with joy.

Kusaoka-san and I left MOL Burger behind us. When I looked up at the sky, there were neon lights: varied and squalid, the emblem of man-made greed.

In the city we live in, there is no such thing as darkness. Today, the city was sparkling so brilliantly it made my heart ache.

"That was an outrageous story, wasn't it?" As I walked along the white section of the pedestrian crossing, I turned my gaze to Kusaoka-kun, who was walking on the black section. It was as if the two of us symbolised an angel and devil.

We had learned only one thing from the meek Anna-san.

"So money exchanged hands in the student counselling room next to the staffroom…"

"…I can't imagine using a place like that, though."

"Indeed." I had never realised that a safe zone like that existed.

It was nothing less than an outrage.

Then again, only the teachers could use it freely. The idea of the clergy making a meal out of students on the black market signifies the end of the world. They warranted a firm denouncement. If she made a mistake, Anna-san deserved a denouncement too.

The scene at MOL Burger had taken up quite a lot of time. As if competing with the night sky pressing down from above, the neon lights shone with gaudy bluster.

Prosperity usually has a shadowy side.

The giant department store, a relic of a bygone era, brings to mind the objet d'art known as the oversized shell. When it fell, the crowds became sacrifices. There was no end to the repair work being done on the highway, which stretched out across the city like a blanket. The Olympics were only just around the corner, but there were

rumours that the operations have been stopped because of a peculiar political judgement.

If you ventured into the back alley, there was a smorgasbord of oddballs and eccentrics: vagrants who sat and slobbered while drinking some kind of medicine, religious folk who chanted things like "Repent" and "The world is ending" under their breath, elderly women hugging soft toys as they scanned the skies for their infant children. Their life-changing burdens constantly came to a head, and not a day went past when I didn't hear the ambulance siren blaring.

However.

I bore no ill feeling towards this town full of open seams. I wondered if this would be considered the kind of love people reserve for their hometown. The more one lays eyes upon defects, the more one's love is inflamed.

Before I knew it, I was humming.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Kusaoka-san teased me politely. Somehow, it seemed as if he was in a good mood too.

"Now then, when we consider Shia-san's whereabouts and the true nature of the other loan shark, there are many, many more things to investigate. We can also spend more time together, Haruma-san!"

"Um, but I want to go home?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

I was astonished at his unexpected response.

Take a deep, deep breath. In and out. That way, I could calm my heartbeat.

As I fought to keep my breathing under control, I looked up at Kusaoka-san, trembling like a leaf. “What a thing to say out of the blue… The two of us are still high school students, you know.”

“Huh?”

“When you invite someone of the opposite sex to a private place, I would like you to know that person well enough first.”

“Huh? Why would you want to come to my house?”

“Huh? Don’t tell me you wanted to leave me and go home by yourself?”

“Well, yeah…”

“H-Huuuuh?”

I was no longer aware how many times my questions had been answered with questions. By the end, my stunned face met his, and that left me even more perplexed.

I could only say that our communication was dead. I wondered what on earth this person was thinking.

By your side is the perfect girl whom you fell in love with at first sight, with unrivalled good looks and a wonderful personality. Above anything else, you are being told that she has a lot of time to spare right now.

Why must you take actions that foil your chances right before your eyes? I am at a loss for words right now!

“…Okay! I’ve decided!”

“Er, um, what. Shit, I’m scared.”

“Our business is finished for today!”

“Huh, seriously? Now I’m scared for the opposite reasons.”

“And tomorrow we shall meet again! Haruma-san, you have no right to refuse!”

"Huh? Now I'm *really* scared."

I have a favourite motto: Volunteer for unpopular service.

Kusaoka-san somehow seemed like the type of person who had few friends. Much as I found it hard to believe, he did have those moments of awkward communication. Even the caveman with his straw skirt and stone hammer learned to cooperate with others in order to hunt.

In today's concrete jungle, I wondered if a child sent from heaven intended to live all alone. They would be considered a grotesque anomaly, even an enemy of society itself.

For that very reason, only I was capable of taking action with him. I would make him into an enemy of society. That was the duty of a person on the receiving end of love at first sight. I would do it even if every person in the world were to reject him.

"Please leave everything to me! I will make you into a new man, Haruma-san! Being forced to do something you hate doing is what your mother taught you."

"Uh, about that…"

Kusaoka-san nodded almost indiscernibly.

I wondered if my sincere, passionate feelings had gotten through to him. Beyond what he had already said, he did not display any reasons for rejecting me.

Haruma

En route to the station, Chigusa strode briskly through the night.

She brought me out, parted ways with me and made plans to meet up tomorrow without as much as a by your leave. That free spirit of hers was evident through her long, luscious black hair, which bobbed up and down like a hopping rabbit.

As I gazed at her back through the corner of my eyes, I muttered under my breath. *Volunteer for unpopular service, huh?* Japanese sure is a difficult language to get one's head around[1].

It was something I sensed vaguely, but a seed of conflict lay between Chigusa and me. We were worlds apart, as different as night and day.

"Hey, Chigusa," I called out to her.

"Yes?" Chigusa swung around on the spot, causing the edge of her skirt to flutter.

"I think there's a fatal discrepancy in what we've been saying to each other."

"I agree. Since we don't know each other well yet, I suppose that kind of thing is inevitable. *However*, even if mutual concessions are difficult, I believe there will be no problems if I come to understand you completely, Haruma-san!"

Chigusa spoke with sparkling eyes and a rather solemn air, but what she was saying was even more psycho. She had the eyes of a kid who had been sucked into some new-fangled religion.

Oh, and let's not forget what she actually said. I had given up trying to understand Chigusa a long time ago. In fact, as far as I was concerned, there was not one atom of her I wanted to understand…

Well, putting aside the fact that I wasn't about to understand Chigusa anytime soon, I did grasp that there was mutual awareness of that between us… For once, I agreed with her about something! Not that it fixed any of our problems!

Chigusa skipped along like a baby deer, humming all the while. When she kept her mouth shut, she really did look like a model on the front cover of a magazine. There was no way I would ever understand what went on in Chigusa's head or heart, but no matter how deceptive outward appearances may be, there were some things that couldn't be mistaken.

As I trudged behind her, scores of squalid buildings blinded me with fake lights, and mobs of people spoke around us with strange, coquettish voices. The town's sights were so familiar that they seemed nothing but bland, not that it bothered me in the least.

1 The Japanese expression is 他人の嫌がることを進んでやりなさい. It's a popular saying. Translated literally, it means "You must advance by doing what others dislike".

"This is Romeo 1, headed to war zone."

"Romeo 2, copy that."

"Romeo 3, roger."

"Been a while since our last big battle."

"Don't go crying to your mama."

"Isn't it a bit early for the Thanksgiving turkey?"

"Bogey on radar."

"Prepare for engagement."

"Where are they? Don't see them… Oh my god."

"Above! Above!"

"Monster!"

"Get him!"

"Don't get too close!"

"Close to where?!"

"All of it!"

"Mayday, mayday!"

"Hotel 4, requesting cover, requesting cover…"

"Charlie 3, communication blackout!"

"Oscar 2, down in flames!"

"Wingman missing, missing!"

"Oh God…"

"Oh no…"

"I love you, Canaria."

Chapter 5
Yuu

Over the next few days, Kusaoka-san and I investigated the most noteworthy among my friends.

Though we had finally gotten to the bottom of Anna-san's testimony, time was of the essence. The other loan shark must have certainly given money to those on my client list. I had no doubt that Shia-san herself had been infected by those poisonous fangs.

Our school was located in the hinterlands of a quiet, slightly remote school zone. That place would likely set the stage for the climax of our adventure. By the time we arrived, it had become quite dark. Only the plane formations moving across the sky seemed to watch over us.

A young boy and girl fraternising at this hour would cause no end of problems for the PTA. I inched closer to the boy beside me.

"What a pickle, Haruma-san."

"What is?"

"Let's not do anything that would make us ashamed to see the light of day."

"Yeah, like what?"

As much as Kusaoka-san desperately attempted to avoid the topic, no boy dislikes being within touching distance of his ideal girl. Beneath his apathetic expression, his nose was growing like Pinocchio's.

Over these past few days, he had truly opened up to me. Was it as if we were dating? Is that how one would put it? His happiness

came across to me loud and clear. We did make some good progress today as well.

Now then, onto the matter at hand. Was the teacher in charge of the key still around?

The school gates were shut tight, as if they were made with an iron curtain. I could see the familiar school building on the other side, cloaked in a tranquil sort of darkness. During the day, it was overrun with students, and the damaged structure brought to mind a withered tree. Fortunately, this was the only time I had something important to do here. I walked along the fence, blending into the small patches of darkness that grew between the streetlights.

A private residence lay next to our school. It was a red-roofed, two-storey, single-family home. I suppose it was home sweet home to whoever had worked hard to buy it. On the other side of the curtains, blissful-sounding laughter rang out.

I picked up a rock beside my foot.

There is something I have always been hiding until now: When I was in elementary school, I was always called the Cyclone Ace of the baseball team. Once again, the time had come for the dead ball to erupt from my hand, a brushback that threatened to tear out the batter's throat. I aimed at the veranda next door, brandishing the rock with all my strength.

"—What are you trying to do?"

I felt someone snatch my hand from the side. It was Kusaoka-san. I had just been going through the motions of a pitch, but this was a balk! A three-strike rule violation!

I might have been the Cyclone Ace, but I never did learn the rules of baseball. *You shall achieve victory if you hit the ball far away with*

your bat! That sort of thing is rather too primitive and not the object of an enlightened person's interest.

"Please unhand me. I must become an ace once more."

"I don't get what you're saying. Like, what, are you gonna break the glass? Race off on a stolen motorcycle and get hurt on window glass?"

"Quoting *A Night at Fifteen* and *Sotsugyo,* I see. How antiquated, Haruma-san. Young students these days don't listen to songs like that."

"I like them a lot, though… Okay, so what do *you* listen to?"

"*Jukensei Blues* and things like that."

"That's even older than Ozaki, isn't it[1]?"

Kusaoka-san's hand cut through empty space. Putting aside the fact that within a moment he would hit my head and that an inconceivable violence lay within him, I was amazed. It was my first time quoting a song title. My Johannes points went up again! Tonight, I would provide some dinner fanservice and maybe even ask for sweets!

"Haruma-san, you are a special case." I beamed. Kusaoka-kun applied himself to such subtle details. He did have quite a few commendable traits.

"I have no idea why you're smiling…"

"More importantly, is it not forbidden for students to enter the building for private use once the school gates have been closed?"

"Can you tell me what that rule has to do with breaking a window?"

"Breaking a window is a serious matter. The police might even come. Don't you suppose it's possible that a teacher still at school would be disturbed by the noise and go outside the building to

survey the situation? Then we make use of the distraction to push the teacher over."

"Pushing isn't necessary, but I do grant you it's possible. It's just a hypothetical, though…" Kusaoka-san let out a sigh of admiration.

Then he started rubbing his head.

"Um, I'm gonna ask you something reaaaaally obvious."

"What is it?"

"…Wouldn't it break your heart to do something like that?"

"One good deed a day, I say." I smiled.

"What is this chick spouting?"

I heard Kusaoka-san utter something peculiar.

Come to think of it, my words might have been somewhat difficult to follow.

"Let's see, one good deed a day is a proverb. It derives from Buddhist teachings."

"That's not what I meant…" Kusaoka-san looked up at the sky. He looked so manly I found it rather affecting.

One good deed a day.

When it was explained to me in my elementary school ethics class, I was terribly struck by it. As much as those words appeared to encompass the concept of performing a single act of good a day, they were deeply suggestive.

Why was it one good deed? Why not ten good deeds or a hundred good deeds?

Anyone who comes upon these questions will of course be greeted with a ready-made answer.

To put it simply, human kindness is a limited commodity. Endless charity is a poison that turns people dependent. In Akutagawa

Ryuunosuke's masterpiece *The Spider's Thread,* the Buddha's iron hammer of justice brings down the arrogant Kandata.

That's right. People with good sense must only perform one good deed a day.

I had already done Kusaoka-san a great service by volunteering to go on a date with him. That is to say, my good deed of the day had already been sold out. Now, my heart had turned to the devil and I was compelled to break windows.

"Hyaa!"

"Ahh!"

Taking advantage of the momentary gap in time when Kusaoka-san loosened his grip, I hurled the rock, only for it to fly off-kilter. The Cyclone Ace had failed.

One more time. As I searched for another rock, I felt a pair of arms pin me from behind. Oh? Kusaoka-san's palms were touching a strange part of my chest, were they not?

I call foul! This deserves a yellow card, I say! A yellow card! Actually, make that a black card! Touching me comes at a high premium! All the black cards under the sky would not be a sufficient sum! To be honest, I never did learn the rules of soccer.

"I get it already. I get it. Wait here a bit," Kusaoka-san sighed as I struggled violently against him.

He returned to the front of the school gates and thrust his arm to the side. And then—what do you know?—he was able to scale the school gates, the supposed iron curtain, as if it was the Berlin Wall.

"Here, gimme your hand." Having scrambled up the gates, Kusaoka-san offered me his hand.

When I blithely clasped his hand, he pulled me up with a level of strength beyond my comprehension. There was a sense of security

in a boy's palm, which somehow struck me as devious. My wrists tingled and I could feel my cheeks burning a little.

Somehow, I was able to smooth over my wrinkled blouse. Since that made my chest look rather flat, I added some slight protrusions. There, that should do it for now.

"… It was a joke. Do you really think I would break the window of a lawful citizen's house?" I said in a small voice, relying on his hand even as I was climbing down the gate.

"But you were halfway through chucking a rock when I stopped you, weren't you?"

"You see, I had utmost faith in you, Haruma-san. It is proof of our trust."

"… Oh, okay."

Kusaoka-san casually let go of my hand with a nod and shoved his hands into his pockets as if nothing had happened.

… Yes.

In that short time, it seemed as if our symbiotic relationship had strengthened. I had me to thank for it. My heart had turned to the devil, as if I had been led astray. I would have to accept a guidance fee later.

1 Ozaki Yutaka was a famous Japanese musician, well-known for his hits *A Night at Fifteen* (1983) and *Sotsugyo* (1985), which were both about teenage rebellion. *Jukensei Blues* (1967) by Nakagawa Goro is a protest song about the plight of students preparing for university entrance exams. It was based off the Bob Dylan song *North Country Blues.*

Haruma

There's an expression that goes like this: *give and take.*

Giving and taking are fundamental parts of baseball. Throwing and catching are performed in equal measure. You throw the ball so that it's easier for the other person to catch, and you pay attention to their movements. The implication is that practice makes you aware of those things, I believe.

And so, going by that criterion, Chigusa Yuu was the worst kind of pitcher imaginable.

Her pitching form wasn't bad. She didn't throw like a girl, and she twisted her shoulders and hips properly. The speed of her pitch was sufficient for a girl. Plus, it was nice how she threw the ball so confidently, just like a real pitch.

It was just that her control was abysmal.

"Hyaa!"

With that unfocused cry, she sent the rock flying off-kilter. While we're at it, my conversation with Chigusa went flying off-kilter as well.

Despite being well aware that it was wrong to break a freaking window, Chigusa had, for some inexplicable reason, hurled a rock at the house next door.

"…Ahh!"

As I stood stunned at this unforeseen action, Chigusa only smacked her head lightly. "Whoops-a-daisy," she giggled, before once again searching for a hand-sized rock.

No more of that. Flustered, I grabbed Chigusa by the shoulders and pinned her to the spot. There were many things I wanted to say, but it was all so much for me that the most I could do was breathe heavily.

If she was literally throwing stones, did that make her a foot soldier or something? In days gone by, stones were considered light weaponry. Even in modern Japan, their destructive power hadn't changed, damn it.

As I mentally berated her, I finally caught my breath. When I inhaled deeply, the sweet and subtle mixture of perfume and shampoo tickled my nostrils. I looked down at Chigusa in my arms and noticed her moaning and groaning as she struggled against me. My right hand, which had snaked around her body from behind, was on her slender, stiffened hips, while my left hand was stretched across her uniform, on the protruding part of her chest. As soon as I became aware of that fact, my palm belatedly began to feel something.

…*Sure is soft,* I thought, although for some reason the cloth of her uniform was stiff and hard to touch. One of the world's mysteries!

Not that this was going to lead to a mystery hunt for Super Hitoshi-kun in bed1.

"Ahh, er, my bad…"

I promptly jumped away from Chigusa. My voice came out feebler than I thought it would, and it seemed that Chigusa did not hear it. Thanks to the traces of elasticity my palm had felt, I couldn't bring myself to look Chigusa in the eyes.

Hang on a minute, why was this chick so thin…? And why was she so soft despite being a rake…? Is it true that girls are soft even when they're skinny? Please tell me, Gyaruko-chan2!

But, well, she was soft all over, and it wasn't like she had a particular sweet spot. Actually, my fingertips had felt the cloth of her uniform as well as something faintly elastic. When it came to size, Chigusa's *chibusa* were nothing to write home about.

What a misnomer! I had no doubt that if Chigusa did have huge tits, the boys in her class would call her 'Chibusa' as a dare.

When that thought occurred to me, I figured it might be a good thing that hers were small instead. It's a status symbol! A status symbol, I say! The Nativity of John the Baptist! Yes! Johannes!

I was a shy and all-too-pure boy who fought to preserve the peace by thinking as many inane thoughts as I could. Speaking as the innocent and pure boy in the class, just touching a girl was bound to cause a reaction in all sorts of places!

On the other hand, you could say Chigusa was also pure from a certain perspective. Pure evil, that is!

All of a sudden, Akutagawa's *Hell Screen* came to mind. The story was about an artist who was unable to choose the means that would lead him towards his ultimate purpose, and in the end he was beyond saving. In *The Spider's Thread*, on the other hand, the Buddha might have toyed with Kandata in the name of salvation, but Chigusa Yuu, who unblinkingly took actions that would turn this world into a living hell, would receive a get-out-of-jail free card from that cheap-ass Buddha.

"Haruma-san," she rebuked me with a single utterance.

Her voice was quiet like the night-time frost, and her smile was warm like sunlight beaming through foliage, but nevertheless her entire manner screamed her dissatisfaction at me.

"I get it already. I get it. Wait here a bit."

As I held Chigusa with my hands to restrain her, I cast a glance at the school building.

When I noticed that the lights were on inside part of the staffroom, I figured that someone was still there. Which meant that the alarm system had not yet activated. However much we shook the gates, the security firm wouldn't hear a peep. Or at least, that was how it *should* be…

"Okay…"

I put my hand on the gate and hoisted myself over it, holding a pose just like what you saw on the jacket of one of Ozaki's albums. Scaling this height was no big deal for an average high school boy.

The problem was the girl.

"Here, gimme your hand," I heard myself call out to her. My hand closed tightly around her tiny palm with its slender, pliant fingers and faint pink nails that sparkled in the streetlights.

Once we were over the school gates, I shoved my hands into my pockets in a diligent attempt to feign ignorance. Unfortunately, a definite heat still remained in my hand; try as I might, I could not cool it down.

As I mumbled a response to Chigusa, I started power-walking towards the school building. Just then, the front entrance of the building lit up. I could see someone striding towards us from the door. Maybe we had been spotted scaling the walls, or maybe we had caused too much of a racket—well, either way, it was

natural for someone to come looking if they saw a suspicious shadow this late at night.

"Hey, looks like we got busted. What now?"

As I turned to Chigusa, ready to scram any moment now, she slipped behind my back and started talking about something that sounded completely irrelevant.

"Haruma-san. Are you aware of the stratagem known as *tsurinobuse*?"

"Huh? Ohh, it's, uh… whaddaya call it? A decoy strategy. The Shimazu clan used it a lot or something."

My memory was vague, but that was probably about right. Wait, hang on, why was Johannes suddenly quizzing me about the Sengoku period…? Also, why was she tugging on my back so much…?

"You're well-informed. That is indeed correct. It is a high-level tactic that involves withdrawing the main forces and using the rear to stop the enemy by fighting to the death. Don't you believe that now is a good time for *tsurinobuse* to make an appearance?"

"Yep." Then I paused. "Wait, you just described ditching someone."

Ditching and *tsurinobuse* were two sides of the same coin: The Daimyo of the Satsuma province, a member of the Shimazu family, used these tactics in the Kyushu Campaign. It's easy to get confused so paying attention is a must. Not that I reckon it'll be on the exam at all.

"…You really are well-informed."

From the way she spoke she sounded impressed, but her expression was clearly one of disappointment. Um? Just what was she planning to make me do?

As much as I wanted to grill her about it, time had already run out.

The person coming out of the school building had already reached us.

"Wh-What is this racket…?"

The owner of the trembling voice was none other than my homeroom teacher Kuriu-sensei.

"Oh, 'scuse me." I gulped. "Good evening."

"…O-Oh my… Kusaoka… kun?"

The teacher blinked furiously, looking utterly perplexed. Weeeell, there was kind of a pause before she called out my name, but it wasn't like she forgot who I was, right? Right?

"What are you doing here at this hour?" said Kuriu-sensei. She put her hands on her hips and pouted. "We can't have you walking around at night. And you're with a girl too." She had noticed Chigusa hiding behind me. "Didn't I tell you at homeroom about all those disappearances? Young girls in particular have been disappearing around these parts."

For once, the gentle, calm, pleasant and carefree Kuriu-sensei from the classroom seemed genuinely affronted. The prime offender in this case was Chigusa, who was using me as a lightning rod. I had done nothing wrong; in fact, I was the victim here.

That was exactly why I needed to take a firm stance at this point. I would boldly tune out my teacher's reprimands. Mwahaha! When people are convinced that they are victims who stand on the side of justice, they become haughtier than usual and lash out at everything they come into contact with. If they ever get called out instead, they gain the right to derail the conversation!

"Er, well, calling them disappearances is an exaggeration." I blinked. "Ohh, does that urban legend or whatever have some credibility?"

"You mean the Random Crossroad? Yes, that rumour has been going around." Kuriu-sensei sighed tersely and put a hand on her cheek. "I wonder just who is spreading it. It's a terrible nuisance."

Now all that was left was to keep sidestepping the issue even more naturally and I would be in the clear!

"Aren't they basically just running away from home or slipping out at night? Are they investigating it properly?"

These things happen when you're young. They'll go to Tokyo and make it big, save up their dough and that kind of thing. That said, buying cows is kind of a joke[3]… Oh, wait a minute, we're already in Tokyo, aren't we?

I wonder where young Tokyoites go to make it big…

As those thoughts went through my head, a flash of fear passed through Kuriu-sensei's eyes.

"That could be it, maybe… That's what the police seem to think, although the investigations themselves haven't really been

getting anywhere. They've been receiving information regularly, but, well, you know…"

"Sounds like a problem," I chimed in like a fresh-faced corporate slave.

Now then, time to be off! was all I could think as I made to head for the hills, but then Kuriu-sensei suddenly realised I was there.

"…So then, why did you come to school at this hour?" she asked me accusingly.

"Ah, well, you see…"

In the end, I couldn't pull the wool over her eyes, huh…? As I found myself losing track of all the excuses I could be using about now, Chigusa poked her head out from behind me.

"Please wait. Haruma-san may well be a bad person with a seedy face who takes a young and helpless girl out late at night, but I believe that is absolutely no reason to convict him without trial. Let us first hear him out in a warm place before taking such action!"

That's right! If I'm gonna get judged sooner or later, it might as well be in a warm court of justice! Better yet, just skip straight to the plea bargaining! Not that this was the time to buddy up with Chigusa.

"…Chigusa, shut up. You're not helping."

"Why is that? I thought it was the perfect plan to be summoned inside the school without hurting anybody."

"Okay. I can see from what you just said that I don't count as a person. All right, just leave it to me. Okay? Please, be a good

girl," I whispered to Chigusa secretively, prompting her to pout peevishly.

"If you say so," she said, backing down.

What a relief. I didn't want to get screwed around any further.

Kuriu-sensei had been watching our exchange with hawk-like eyes, but as it turned out, I had a trump card to use against the teacher.

"Amane-chan, er, I mean, my sister asked me to do something for her…"

"Kusaoka-sensei?" Kuriu-sensei paused for a while to think. "I see."

She gave a little nod in acceptance and pointed towards the school building.

"Let's go inside for now, all right?"

"Ah, yes. Excuse me."

Chigusa and I walked towards the school building, following the teacher's pace.

As we went along, Chigusa scampered up to me like a tame puppy. "My plan was a perfect success! We should keep making arrangements like this from now on," she whispered into my ear with an affable smile. "If you keep this up, my points will accumulate and multiply like *whoosh*! You will become a wealthy man who will put the Enten market to shame, Haruma-san."

"We didn't have a plan or an arrangement, and also that sounds like a scam[4]…"

What was this chick saying…?

Yet somehow or other, beyond all explanation, the Johannes points seemed to keep climbing forever and ever. Amen. Wasn't the grant criterion ridiculous? And come to think of it, I had never heard how the Johannes points were supposed to be used. I was too scared to ask.

At this point, I wondered if I ought to start thinking about opening my Frequent Flyer Harumileage Program. However, all of Chigusa's actions had a negative assessment, so I wasn't able to accumulate any miles…

What I did accumulate was stress and fatigue.

1 Hitoshi-kun is the mascot of the Japanese documentary series *Sekai Fushigi Hakken* (trans. "Discovery of the World's Mysteries"). Every week, a Super Hitoshi-kun doll can be spotted somewhere onscreen, sort of like a Where's Wally game.

2 A reference to the manga *Oshiete! Gyaruko-chan,* which follows the adventures of a stereotypical *gyaru* (i.e. girly girl).

3 He's quoting the lyrics of *Ora Tokyo sa Igu da* (trans. "I'll Go to Tokyo"). The song is set around a young cow breeder living in the countryside, who longs about moving to Tokyo and to make it big.

4 Enten (lit. "divine yen") was the virtual currency used by the fraud businessman Nami Kazutsugi, who managed to scam $1.4 billion from his 37,000 or so investors.

Yuu

Good girls shine brilliantly in the corner of the staffroom, even during sleeping hours.

Kuriu-sensei bade us to sit in the reception lounge in the corner of the room. After offering us some tea, she took a seat facing us. Her back was against the door to the student counselling room.

Kuriu-sensei had never taught me directly, but from what I could surmise through her conversation with Kusaoka-san, she was his homeroom teacher. Even a person like him deferred to someone. It's amazing what school does to a person.

"I see, so the school gates were open… That's understandable, then. Did the last teacher who left forget to close the gates?"

The soothing cadence of her voice, coupled with her soft, wafting perfume, tickled my eardrums.

Her hair, complete with one or two bangs tucked behind her ears, resembled a fly trap coaxing young creatures to play with fire.

Her light-pink blouse was wide open, emphasising the shape of an ample bosom quite unfitting for clergy members. As she oozed with charm appealing to the opposite sex, her every slight and unselfconscious movement caused a shadow to fall on her cleavage.

"Now then, Kusaoka-san, about this errand of yours…"

Her breathy sigh, characteristic of a mature woman, spread across the table. Suddenly, it clicked. So she was *that* type of person.

I understood perfectly.

Kuriu-sensei… was most certainly not a bad person!

Just from hearing about her, some members of our sex would judge a person like that and vilify her as calculating and flirtatious, but there is nothing as unproductive as a woman's jealousy. Instead of growing fat in one's little pen and squealing indignantly, people

ought to at least work on themselves first so that they don't judge others insensitively. Even a weak person like me has never uttered a single bad thing about others since the day I was born. I have tried my absolute best not to call anyone a pig.

"The thing is, my sis seems to have lost her smartphone."

The pig… no, Kusaoka-san spoke just as we had arranged.

Haruma

Resolving to act as naturally as possible, I slowly opened my mouth.

Time to improvise.

Chigusa sipped on her tea nonchalantly, all but saying that she was leaving it all to me. Well, since I'd never seen Chigusa engage in a straightforward conversation, things would probably go smoother if I did the talking at times like these. Chigusa, with her penchant for misunderstanding and asking threatening questions, was forever out of reach, the sort of person it was completely impossible to have a dialogue with. Er, not that I would say that conversational skills are my forte either, you know?

That said, I'm usually hanging around but not saying anything to people, inwardly stewing on my words instead. Most of it was worthless crap I was never going to use, but I took it all to heart anyway.

That was why, as long as I took the time to memorise the words, I could repeat them effortlessly. The problem was reciting the words smoothly. I looked like an idiot talking slowly and listlessly.

In order to get home as quickly as possible, I had to provide results that would keep Chigusa happy. Right now, what I had to make certain of was the location of the key and its owner, as well as the main user of the counselling room.

I cast my gaze on the area behind Kuriu-sensei.

"My sister said she might've left it in the student counselling room, so may I go in? Is it locked?"

"The student council president is using it right at this moment, so the door's unlocked… Do you want to have a bit of a look?" Kuriu-sensei put down her cup and hurriedly attempted to rise to her feet.

"Oh, no, if someone's using it right now, we'll pass."

If we actually went inside, I'd end up in the sticky spot of having to keep up the conversation while pretending to search the room. If you ask me, that would be stupid. In fact, it would be convenient if we couldn't enter at the moment. Time to ask those burning questions.

"So are you in charge of the key, Sensei? I thought that would be the vice principal's job or something."

"On paper, yes. But I have permission to use it after school," Kuriu-sensei said as if she was letting me in on a little secret. She flashed a smile in Chigusa's direction as well. It was like she was saying we could pop in anytime.

I don't really like it when people act nice like that. I don't know if it has something to do with my sister's influence, but I associate crudeness, laziness and coerciveness with women on a fundamental level, so I can't help but feel suspicious

whenever someone speaks and acts in a gentle and courteous way. My suspicious nature was probably the reason why I couldn't help but feel that something was off about Kuriu-sensei, beautiful though she was.

Thanks to my misgivings, the phrase *after school* brought me some slight unease.

"But being in charge of the key even after school sounds like a lot of responsibility. So again, why you, Sensei?" I asked.

Kuriu-sensei put a hand on her cheek and opened her mouth meditatively. "It's probably because I'm often the last to leave the campus, just like today. I also have to speak with students fairly regularly…"

"…Okay, so this is your private place at night, Sensei." A long pause. "Ah, that's pretty convenient."

My mouth said one thing, but I had no idea what I meant by convenient. I mean, I had no idea what I was supposed to say full stop.

People often use half-assed filler phrases when they're stuck in a conversation, huh? "Indeed" and "quite" are safe and easy-to-remember words. Once you master them, you always have a comeback no matter what horse shit the other person says! Indeed, quite.

Yuu

Kusaoka-san performed the investigation briskly. I could see why. If he did not work diligently to accumulate points even at minor junctures, my Johannes points would dwindle over time.

Incidentally, one piece of evidence that Kuriu-sensei was not a bad person lay in the way she moved her eyes and hands when she spoke. It was as if she had no inclination to approach the opposite sex whatsoever. If she was a so-called product of her environment, she would have been eying Kusaoka-san, the male in this situation, all the while pretending not to be aware of him at all.

Kusaoka-san sighed. "Okay, so you use the student counselling room often, Sensei. How about the other teachers? Do you, um, do counselling together or something?"

"The students often don't want others to know about their problems, so I try my best to keep things confidential."

Kusaoka-san made a mildly interested noise. "They don't want others to know, so it's confidential, I see."

"Of course, if they trusted me more, I wouldn't have to use that room in the first place…"

Despite her lack of interest in him as a man, she was sincerely and politely concentrating on her answers. As she thought through each response diligently, she would turn her gaze squarely upon me with a slow, deliberate blink. She would adjust her voice so that I could hear her, as if solely for my sake.

It was as if I was the only person in the world.

At this point, there was a possibility that Kusaoka-san did not count as human. A big possibility, in fact. Oh dear. What a pickle. Kuriu-sensei was destroying my assumption that she was a good person.

As I gazed kindly upon Kusaoka-san, who had unhelpfully been counted among the brutes of this world, the student counselling room door swung open.

"Kuriu-sensei, our work is done," a soothing voice rang out.

From the room emerged an exceptionally handsome young man who would steal anyone's attention.

He had dignified brows and warm, gentle eyes. Everything from the bridge of his nose to his thin, almost feminine lips was carved onto his sculpted features like a work of art. His limbs were long and firm, harmonising with the rest of his body to a superlative extent. I could hardly believe that Kusaoka-or-whoever-san was made of the same protein. Even the world of protein is subject to variation.

"Oh dear, sorry for interrupting your conversation."

Even the way he bowed his head was full of refinement. He glanced at us and—

"Thank you, Chigusa-kun. You've been a big help to my little sister. I wonder how Misa-chan's been doing since then?"

We had never once spoken face-to-face, and yet he knew my face and name. He never missed a step.

I would expect nothing less of the current student council president—Suzaku Reiji-san.

A popular young man, he had joined the student council in his first year and become the president in his second. In his third year, no rivals stood to challenge him, and so he was re-elected without a vote. It was said that he received enough chocolate on Valentine's Day from schools and universities outside the prefecture to fill a mini-truck.

Suddenly, it clicked. I understood perfectly.

Suzaku-san… was most certainly a bad person!

Anyone with even a one-percent chance of becoming my soulmate must essentially be a bad person! Either that or he must bear a societal handicap such as athlete's foot or an NTR fetish!

"Reijiii, who's she?" a languid female voice called out behind him.

The girl, who wore makeup in the so-called hip Shibuya-style, stood next to Suzaku-san and stared hard at me as if she were measuring me. Could it be that she was Suzaku-san's handicap? She did seem rather like baggage.

"She's the older sister of my sister's friend, I guess you could say. I still have some formalities to take care of, so could you go to the shoe lockers ahead of me?"

"… Fiiiiine."

With an intimidating glare in my direction, she stomped out of the staffroom, snorting like a buffalo.

"Sorry. She's not a bad girl, but she's not good at opening up to other people." Suzaku smiled wryly.

Now that he mentioned it, my Johannes Report stated that many girls clamoured to be the student council secretary or to be in charge of general affairs or some such thing. Perhaps there was something about him that made girls want to get closer to him through any means. What an unbelievably despicable person. I had to make haste and prepare an anonymous document to slander him.

Haruma

When Suzaku Reiji's companion went out into the hallway, she left the staffroom door wide open in order to glare daggers at Chigusa, and from to time she let out this incomprehensible noise that sounded like "Reijiii, Reijiii," as if she were some kind of two-headed monster. *Ohh, so that's what a growl sounds like,* I thought, although somehow it looked like she was upset about leaving early. I thought leer and growl were only ever used in Pokémon.

Still, appealing to go home was a thing, huh?

I was just like this girl… whatever her name was. Oh well, let's call her Gyarumi-chan. I ought to take a leaf out of Gyarumi-chan's book and pressure Chigusa to go home. I tried everything: paced the hallways, cleared my throat, stamped my feet and skulked around.

But there was no way Chigusa would notice. I wondered if maybe I *should* kick up a fuss and be all like *"Johaaaaannes, Johaaaaannes"* in a subdued, needling tone… As I was caught in indecision, I heard a voice beside me.

"Hey."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gyarumi-senpai playing with her cell phone. Did she just talk to me, I wonder? *But if her "hey" is short for "Hey, I've got no reception/batteries/mobile data!" then I'll make a fool of myself by responding…* I thought, adopting a wait-and-see approach, only for Gyarumi-senpai to look up from her screen and scowl at me.

"Huh? You're ignoring me? That kinda pisses me off."

I exhaled. "Sorry."

Well now, so she was talking to me after all, huh? I thought for sure she was an Ikuzo kinda gal, but then again, there's no way of knowing. I mean, the average high school girl wouldn't know Ikuzo1. Not to mention Gyarumi-senpai appeared not to know what everyone else knew: look at the person you're talking to.

As she opened her mouth, Gyarumi-senpai thrust her chin in Chigusa's direction. "Hey you, are you close to *her*?"

"No, I wouldn't say we're close," I answered with complete and utter sincerity.

"Suuuuure." Gyarumi-senpai snorted, unconvinced. Then a nasty smile came over her face. "But y'know, you'd be soooo much better off forgetting about *her*."

I cocked my head and asked why just through my eyes. At that point, Gyarumi-chan launched into an eager rant, her nostrils flared.

"I heard some seriously bad things about her. Like, she's a total bitch."

Well, yeah.

"She just pretends to be cute."

Could not agree more.

"She's a pain in the ass about money."

That too.

"Plus, y'know, she's been making eyes at our Reiji, see?"

Well, no.

After these past few days with Chigusa Yuu, I had a pretty good grasp of her many character faults. The bad rumours Gyarumi-senpai had uttered just now were eighty per cent true. Wait a minute, Gyarumi-senpai, those rumours warped into personal opinions somewhere along the line, didn't they…?

However, that last bit about making eyes was something I couldn't accept. By that, I mean that Chigusa Yuu would never suck up to anybody. She had way too high an opinion of herself.

For that reason, the idea that she was making eyes at Suzaku-senpai or whatever was probably some groundless rumour the other girls in the background cooked up out of jealousy and

resentment. Those other rumours were kinda impossible to refute, though.

"Come to think of it, Suzaku-senpai is pretty popular, huh?"

I had no interest in Suzaku Reiji himself, but the idea that someone could be popular enough to inspire catfights was impressive in my book.

"Well, yeah? What else is new?" Gyarumi-senpai chuckled as she stuck out her rather massive chest with pride. I had no idea what Gyarumi-senpai was so proud of. Was *Reijiii* shared property among all the girls?

"You going out with him?"

"…Not really. We've been trying to get his attention, but Reiji is kinda, y'know, dense? Well, that's how everyone feels at the moment."

Her entire attitude changed in a flash: her shoulders sagged, and she wouldn't meet my eyes.

I sighed. Now I got it. Her insistence to wait before going home was yet another attempt to get his attention. Judging from how she talked, it seemed there were other girls plotting to go out with Suzaku Reiji. Unfortunately for Gyarumi-senpai, her efforts would fail to bear fruit… That chest of hers had certainly ripened, though…

In any case, the idea that Suzaku Reiji was a hit with the ladies was something I could understand. He was genuinely good-looking. He was tall and had a lean body. Despite his good looks, he wasn't frivolous, and even the way he spoke had a soothing effect.

I made an interested noise. “How impressive.”

Looks count for everything when it comes to people. I even judge the boys in my class by their looks. It pains me! But I can’t help but judge! It’s like a jolt goes through me.

As I was gazing at Suzaku Reiji, Gyarumi-senpai burst out: “Huh? Don’t tell me you’re the type who’s jealous of Reiji or something? Very funny! But creepy. Suzaku is a freakin’ phoenix—there’s no way you can compare, y’know?” She cracked up laughing as she pointed at Suzaku-senpai and then at me.

These days, there’s a trope about *gyaru* being nice to otaku and social outcasts, but in no way does it reflect reality. Anyone who believes that trend is real because of manga and light novels should ditch the books and go outside.

In my opinion, the reason that trope exists is because my fellow men have realised that, in the real world, both pure girls and mysterious girls are actually nasty bitches, and they have turned the relatively unknown life form known as a *gyaru* into a new archetype accordingly.

Well, that means that, in the real world, pure girls, mysterious girls, geek girls—and, of course, *gyaru*—are all cold, nasty bitches to social outcasts. No exceptions.

“Hey, speaking of making eyes, what do you think of Kuriu-sensei?”

“Kuryuu? Oh, her… Not that Reiji would ever go for her…” said Gyarumi-senpai, although there was something resentful in

her tone. “Whenever she gets involved with us, she gets really feverish. It’s annoying.”

“Feverish?” I frowned at her choice of words. It didn’t match my image of Kuriu-sensei.

If you ask me, Kuriu-sensei was the kind of person who brought to mind words like calm and gentle and laid-back and big-breasted. But feverish…? *Please tell me, Gyarumi-chan!* I asked Gyarumi-senpai with my eyes, but she only started playing with her curls as if she was struggling to express herself.

“She’s, like, full on or something?”

Her vocabulary, like, sucked!

But still, I kind of got what she was trying to say. Zealous, overprotective, meddling—something like that? I got the gist of it. *Thank you, Gyarumin.*

That was where my conversation with Gyarumi-senpai came to an end. With a disgruntled sigh, Gyarumi-senpai started playing with her cell phone once more. It seemed as if she had gotten bored of me. I deeply apologise for not being a good time waster.

As a result, I now had nothing to do either, so I gazed at Chigusa from a distance, channelling “the boy who stares at the trumpet in the display window[2].

[1] Yoshi Ikuzo sang “I’ll Go to Tokyo” (1984). His stage name is a pun for “Yoshi, ikuzo!”, which translates to the go-getting phrase: “All right, let’s go!”

[2] “The boy who stares at the trumpet in the display window” is an iconic Japanese commercial which ran during the ‘80s. You can watch the ad here: https://youtu.be/U3NxJd4kQws?t=3m

Yuu

"…Suzaku-san," I called out towards the villainous student council president's back just as he finished receiving Kuriu-sensei's approval for his documents and was about to head home.

"Mm, what is it?"

"Does that room get used often?"

"When the teachers aren't using it… let's see. They lend out the key quite often. That's because a lot of odd jobs pile up towards the school festival."

"Does everyone use it?"

"Sometimes people are alone in there, but other times they're not."

"Is it always decided in advance which members use it?"

"Well… sometimes the key gets lent out to people outside the student council. I don't know about those times. I do intend to choose people I trust." Suzaku's well-shaped eyebrows furrowed in discomfort. "More importantly, what sort of business is making you stay behind at school?"

Thus, he openly avoided the topic. "More importantly" is clearly a stock phrase used by people with a guilty conscience!

"This and that. More importantly, what sort of conversation were you having just now with that girl over there? Given that random-something-or-other rumour, you must have some very important business if it warrants a young boy and girl to fraternise at this time of the night!"

"That's a bit rich coming from you." There was a gleam in Suzaku's eyes. Ahh, what an unpleasant gaze. "I don't appreciate such unsubstantiated gossip. A sensible person wouldn't help

spread discomfort because they think it's funny. These days, it's even been a topic for staffroom meetings. Right, Kuriu-sensei?"

"Huh?" The conversation had suddenly turned to Kuriu-sensei. "O-Oh, yes… It's not very nice to spread rumours like that…" she responded, looking down at her feet.

"…And there you have it. You should be mindful of that too, Chigusa-kun. Now then, I'm making her wait so I'll get going now. Please excuse me, Kuriu-sensei."

Suzaku cut off the conversation and went out into the hallway. Hm? I might just be imagining it, but he changed the topic quite deftly, did he not?

I was about to call him to a halt when he seemed to anticipate me. As he looked over his shoulder, he threw me a sharp look.

"I've been hearing a few rumours about you lately, Chigusa-san. I don't believe them, but you should take care."

"Huh."

Before I could tilt my head to confirm what he was saying, the door slammed shut.

Since I am the perfect girl who pushes the boundaries of what humans can achieve, I am the subject of many rumours. There are not enough hours in the day for me to pay heed to each and every one of them. A swan shuts its ears to a frog's croak.

"…Huuuh…"

Kuriu-sensei, who had been holding her breath, let out a deep sigh in front of the low table.

"I'm sorry, Kuriu-sensei. I've been using so much of your time." I lowered my head.

"Oh, no…" she interjected. "I just get a little nervous in front of Suzaku-kun, even though as a teacher I know I shouldn't."

She dropped her gaze in embarrassment. I wondered if Kuriu-sensei had trouble dealing with male students. Or perhaps she was looking down upon Kusaoka-san, a life form who resembled that suave student council president and yet didn't?

It was a difficult judgement to make.

"Hey, Haruma-san." I paused. "Haruma-san? Where's Haruma-san?!"

Before I knew it, Kusaoka-san had vanished from the seat beside me. It was a disappearing act that would surprise even Mr. Malic, the most accomplished of magicians. That I could not even feel his presence made me wonder if this was beyond mere magic. Praise be!

"All right then, Sensei, thank you for your time. Please excuse me."

"Oh my, I wonder if it's okay that you didn't find what you lost."

At any rate, I had to follow Suzaku, student council president and evil incarnate. After saying goodbye to Kuriu-sensei, I went out into the hallway, where I encountered whom else but Kusaoka-san, who had magicked himself away. As it turned out, he was safe and sound.

"My goodness, what a pleasant surprise! You're still alive!"

"Just what did you think happened to me?"

Kusaoka-san was also trembling with joy at reencountering me. He had the eyes of a young boy gazing through a display window at something he pined over. So he was that lonely from being without me. An honest person deserves gold bromide. At this moment in time, a thirty-five year loan was a great deal!

"In any case, we must follow the student council president before he leaves the school."

“Huh? Why?”

“I get the feeling he’s still hiding something.”

“And your basis for this is…?”

“Women’s intuition.”

Kusaoka-san made a sound like *uh-huuuh* and shrugged. Even though I started walking, he did not follow suit. Perhaps the silver bromide twenty-year loan was a better fit for him?

“No need to get diverted,” he said. “Isn’t it your job to question the main brass about the true identity of the loan shark?”

“I am talking to the main brass.” I pointed at the staffroom door agitatedly. “Hold on a moment, please. Haruma-san, could it be that you suspect Kuriu-sensei?”

“Well, she’s one of the choices.”

“I do not think that Sensei is the loan shark,” I declared with feeling.

“Why?”

“Anyone who is into loansharking must have a rotten personality.”

Anyone who would go so far as to lend out money with a high interest rate to people they barely know must only think about money. Money is everything to them. Even if one or two of their clients were to go missing, they would respond with anger and disdain of all things, never once showing an ounce of concern. They are the lowest of the low as far as human beings are concerned.

But Kuriu-sensei was not like that. The agony she felt over the successive disappearances of her students came across to me loud and clear.

“Her behaviour is not an act.”

“That sure is persuasive coming from you.”

“Hm? What ever do you mean?”

“You’re just proving my point.” Kusaoka-san shrugged with feigned ignorance.

“Let me ask you a question in return. Why do you suspect her?”

“It’s a matter of not letting a suspect off the hook just because of the impression they make. If your argument doesn’t hold water, then I won’t believe it. Isn’t that a given when it comes to human relations?”

“I believe in my opinions. Do I need any more reason than that?”

“Well, yeah. Your opinion is not my opinion.”

Kusaoka-san stubbornly refused to nod along with me. He was normally so cooperative, so why was he taking such a contrarian stance today? Was there a physiological reason for that? Ah, wouldn’t that be more likely to apply to me?

I cut off my thoughts, filled with so many of those oh-so-hilarious pickup lines which were popular on the streets, and then breathed in and out slowly. Nothing good springs from conflict. I was born into a peaceful country that attempts to solve problems simply through dialogue.

“Haruma-san, let’s make up. Please. Just like before. Isn’t that how we were until now?”

“I’m the same as I ever was. I’m just speaking my mind now.” Kusaoka-san sighed and looked straight into my eyes. “I wanna go home. I’m more desperate to go home than any corporate slave in the world. From the moment we met, my feelings haven’t changed. You might have free time, but I don’t. Seriously, I don’t.”

“Weren’t you following me happily until now? Weren’t you lending me your strength? What made you change your mind so suddenly…?”

“Hold up, let me correct you. There was not one moment when I was happy. And isn’t your idea of ‘lending your strength’ just making others do the dirty work for you?”

“Well, I can’t deny that.”

“You’re basically agreeing with me…”

Kusaoka-san hung his head quietly. I see now. Kusaoka-san might not have changed much at all. Even on the roof, at MOL Burger and during our investigation, he was always like this.

If that was the case, who was the one who had changed?

Of course, there was no way that I, the eternally perfect girl, would change, so an unseen third person had to be in the picture. Oh dear, Kusaoka-san was saying something very frightening.

…So then what was the pang in my heart?

Whenever I ruminated on Kusaoka-san’s words, a strange pang crept up in my heart. It was a peculiar, uncontrollable aggravation. At first, I was perplexed by these emotions I had never allowed myself to acknowledge before, and then gradually I became chafed by them.

“…Haruma-san. Are you aware of the organisational doctrine that the German officer Hans von Seeckt was said to have advocated?”

“Seeckt? Wasn’t he the guy who said that anyone who is both clever and lazy is qualified for the highest leadership duties, the clever and diligent should go to the General Staff, the stupid and lazy are suited to routine duties, and the stupid and diligent should die?”

“Indeed. I am the clever and lazy person. Therefore, I am in command.”

“If you say so.”

“I am also the clever and diligent person. In other words, I am also the one who writes the battle plans.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That leaves the other two roles to you. Do you understand what I am trying to say?”

“Nope, not a clue.”

Our argument was gradually reaching boiling point. Alternatively, one might call it a one-sided affair.

When it comes to human relationships, the three F’s are a necessity: Flatter, frighten and follow. So far, I had been flattering Kusaoka-san more than enough. Even though I, as the commander and staff, had been given the honour of directing the way, why did he not work according to my thoughts?

At last, I took an angry step forward.

“Please don’t complain about such trivial things—you scum!”

After flattery came frightening. My frightening tactic was a direct form of verbal abuse, plain and simple. A flash of regret passed through my mind when I uttered those words I should not have said, but there was no taking back those words once they were out of my mouth. Indeed. Kusaoka-san was scum who could never be compared to me. Is it not a fact of life that lower-class people follow their superiors?

“Pawns are only necessary for their manpower. Their thoughts are not necessary! Haruma-san, you are scum, so shut up and listen to what I say!”

Haruma

Those were some horribly blunt words from the normally oh-so-polite Chigusa. I could even sense that she was livid, which left me mystified.

Being scum is a matter of pride. There was a part of me that couldn't accept that anyone would call me scum in the first place.

It's good to call a part of yourself *kuzu*, the word for scum. In fact, I'm pretty damn cool for being able to acknowledge my own*kuzu* side. The Kuzu Ryu Sen is a pretty cool kind of *kuzu*, and then there's the romantic kind of *kuzu* like Hoshikuzu Loneliness1.

"I have no idea what you're saying."

I didn't get how she scratched Kuriu-sensei off her list of suspects, nor how she stubbornly treated Suzaku Reiji as the culprit, nor all that business with the loan shark which I could not even begin to fathom, nor her insistence on treating others like pawns, nor her words and actions that defied common sense. There was nothing I understood about Chigusa Yuu the person, not a single thing.

What I did understand was what I could see on the surface: her good looks. That was all.

Chigusa seemed startled by my words. She blinked a couple of times, and then her shoulders slumped. "You still don't understand after all I said to you? I see how it is." She sighed with disgust. "In other words, you want me to define scum for you? Would you like me to provide proof that you are scum, Haruma-san?"

Chigusa's tone was venomous, quivering with more emotion than usual.

"Hm? Hmm, well if that's what you wanna do, be my guest."

This sort of prickly atmosphere came up with Amane-chan from time to time. On those occasions, I would try listening to her for the bare minimum of time necessary and make sympathetic noises. There was honestly no real need for me to understand what was going on. All I had to do was pretend I was listening. I mean, there's no way of seeing into another person's heart. When people keep their emotions close to their chests, a bit of leeway with the truth goes a long way. There's another way of looking at it too. 'A bit' also means something small, which definitely applies to Chigusa's chest!

As all of this was going through my head, Chigusa coughed as if to say *ahem.* "For instance, you don't have a single friend whom you confide in."

"Mhmm."

"You're always secretly looking down on everything in the world!"

"Totally."

"You never understand the other person's point of view. You only see things your way!"

"That sucks, huh?"

"When you're giving an answer, you only say what you want to say. It's such flawed communication!"

Chigusa went on and on with the definition of scum. It was like something from a light novel. If so, then her last response would end up being something like, "Whoever thinks you're scum is scum," and she'd have no choice but to calm down at that conclusion.

At length, my vocabulary of generic phrases to appease whining girls ran dry, which was around the same time Chigusa ran out of fuel on her end, it seemed. She was panting ever so slightly.

"Why won't you understand?! Sensei's sincerity clearly has nothing in common with the loan shark's image as a human waste disposal unit. If you cannot understand that, Haruma-san, then you are a psychopath! What else can you call someone like that but scum?!"

"Indeed, quite. It's just as you say," I uttered feebly, without any heart.

Eheheheh. I feigned an easy-going smile. All this scum talk was wearing me out. As a matter of fact, I didn't have a very thick skin, being scum and all. Even so, I tried my best to weather the storm as much as physically possible. Forcing a smile was causing my cheek muscles to ache.

My patience must have paid off, because I could see Chigusa calming down now that she had finished saying what she had wanted to say. She let out a small, quiet sigh and then smiled in my direction.

"It seems like you finally understand now, Haruma-san. I look forward to building a satisfactory partnership with you in

future. The good thing about scum is that there is very little harm done when they are expended, so you are valuable to me, Haruma-san. Indeed," she said as she clamped her hand on my shoulder. Her smile held a note of achievement and satisfaction.

—which meant that, if I was ever going to say it, now was the time.

"You're the scum here."

Thwack. Harshly yet firmly, I shook off the hand that touched me. Even then, my stiff features remained locked in an unflinching smile.

Get with the fucking program, you psycho loan shark bitch.

The fine balance between my patience and Chigusa's satisfaction was broken. With a no holds barred insurance run scored off the walk-off home run, the game was decided.

"…"

Her mouth agape, Chigusa looked at my face and then at her hand, slowly and deliberately.

Good. Nothing I could say would get through her thick skull anyway. There was no point railing at someone who refused to engage in dialogue, just as there was no point pointing out their errors or giving them advice. Giving someone a piece of your mind isn't mere bitching; it's hitting them where it hurts. It's more effective that way.

Gaining someone's trust and then tearing it down is the true face of the scum of this earth. It's what they live for.

I'll give you a front row seat, Chigusa. This is what it means to be scum.

1 The Kuzu Ryu Sen is a sword move from *Rurouni Kenshin,* while Hoshikuzu Loneliness (trans. 'Stardust loneliness') is a line from the *Touch* OP

Yuu

"You're the scum here."

… It happened before I could blink.

Sharp heat ran through my palm as if it had been pressed with a pair of tongs. The back of my hand throbbed with pain as if my skin was exploding, causing it to swell and twinge in agony.

I realised only belatedly that my hand had been subjected to such a heavy degree of force.

I have trembled in the face of male violence since my first cry as a newborn child, when the doctor spanked me on my bottom. Back then, well, there were reasons for that, one could say, so I placidly took the beating, but this time, I was targeted with awful violence just for walking up to a man. It was an excessively crude way of action. These circumstances warranted a lawsuit.

I flinched. Tears sprang unbidden to my eyes. As I abandoned myself to a state of misery that I could not lift a finger to stop, I nevertheless steeled myself to look up at Kusaoka-san, only to be greeted by a brisk and easy-going smile.

Dumbfounded, I looked back and forth between my stinging palm and the face of the young man who had dealt the damage.

Giving one's hand to another person is nothing to apologise over. From any perspective imaginable, this person was the lowest of the low.

"…Very well," I said in a strained voice. I decided to deliver the severest punishment imaginable. "Very well then. I forfeit my Johannes points. Please go home."

"Wh-Whoa. Seriously?"

"Quickly!"

"Man… If only I knew this would happen from the beginning…"

Kusaoka-san trudged away without showing any form of resistance. Although his back was weighed down with an indefinable sadness, I understood what was happening.

I had resorted to the awfully strict means of stealing away the time we could be together, but it was something I had to do in order to make him reflect upon his actions. He had made an enemy of the weak-willed and timid Chigusa.

When it came to human relationships, the three F's were a necessity. He had already flattered and frightened me. All that remained was following. Indeed. All that Kusaoka-san would do from now on was follow me.

After a couple had been separated once, they would meet again out of deep remorse and magnanimous forgiveness in a moving scene that would make all of America cry. Even Kusaoka-san, who lacked communication skills, would taste loneliness and desolation after being flung away so unceremoniously. He would wallow in shame at the gravity of this error of his own doing. How many seconds would it take for him to come running back?

I wondered how I should receive him. Should I smile and gently put a hand on his shoulder? Or perhaps I should simply make him touch his forehead with his toes? I might even make him wait in the snow and rain, à la the Walk to Canossa. This incident would be inscribed in the official textbooks as Chigusa's Occupation, and it

would become widely known across the nation as evidence of the existence of justice.

Somehow, it was all very exciting to me. It might be a cliché to say that time flies when you're having fun, but that was certainly the case with me. When I started the stopwatch app on my smart phone, one minute passed in the blink of an eye, and then three minutes, and then five minutes, and then—hm?

However long I waited, Kusaoka-san did not return. Even when I strained my ears, all I heard was the intermittent sound of roaring helicopters and the lonely cries of night birds in-between. Like a fool, I stood stock still in the dimly-lit hallway, very much alone.

When my gaze flitted towards the window, I was astonished.

The pitch black gates stood tall in the darkness of the night. There, at the side entrance, was a person.

From the height of the silhouette, it was clearly Kusaoka-san. Regardless of whether he knew I was watching, he was waving cheerfully in my direction as he skipped off into the residential area and disappeared into the night. If I were to call him now on impulse, I would only receive the answering machine. Was he toying with me? He was supposed to be here, by my side.

I could hear my teeth grinding inside my mouth. My two feet stamped the ground in frustration. To think he would make such a fool of me. Now that it had come to this, I would firmly and resolutely hold my ground as Super Saiyan Johannes in the genesis of this terrible, hard-fought conflict—

"… My goodness."

I breathed a sigh. I let go of the window pane and turned around slowly.

"How ridiculous…"

It was the most ridiculous thing I had ever experienced. If this was how he was going to be, then fine. I would play his game. No more do I wish to share my precious resources with him.

Now that it was inconceivable that I was being followed, I took my time leaving the school building. Outside, the night wind encircled me. There was no one to shield me against the wind. Of course, I had no need for anyone like that since the very beginning.

My palm still throbbed with pain. Whether it was because he had hit me or because of some other reason, thinking about it was a bother, so I refused to look back. I clenched my palm into a fist. So that the pain would go away. So that I could ignore the pang in my heart.

What a despicable person.

What a truly despicable person.

For the first time in her life, Chigusa Yuu insulted a human being.

*@ki-sa*721*

somethings been bothering me

*@ki-sa*721*

theres an unknown road in front of my bfs place lol

*@ki-sa*721*

@gial☆star im not talking about our relationship

*@ki-sa*721*

where does it go? its under construction lmao

*@ki-sa*721*

takkuns amazing

*@ki-sa*721*

a walk on an unknown road

*@ki-sa*721*

@gial☆star im so scared im not scared lol

*@ki-sa*721*

takkun

*@ki-sa*721*

huh?

*@ki-sa*721*

its too dark

*@ki-sa*721*

wtf is this. i dont like this at all. nope.

*@ki-sa*721*

@gial☆star

*@ki-sa*721*

so soft and pretty

Chapter 6
Haruma

The breeze had been cool and refreshing earlier, but now it was slowly blending into the damp and muggy air. The ever-distant, overcast sky weighed down upon me as the air became hotter and more humid.

It had been one week since Chigusa and I had stopped seeing each other. This suffocating feeling coincided with my relief at my long-awaited return to a calm and peaceful lifestyle. Even the train bound for school felt hot and sticky on the inside. My inner sense of discomfort only exacerbated my outer sense of discomfort.

The reason it gets more humid as the early phase of summer goes by is not just because of Japan's climate; it's because of humans. A whole new world (AKA the new semester) starts in April, and it exhausts anyone who lives through those days whether they adapt to it or not. This causes the world's humidity level to rise.

Do you understand what I'm getting at?

The spittle flies out of one's mouth during a diligent attempt to make friends in their new class. A cold sweat slides down one's face as all the conversational starters they desperately came up with slip away from them, and on the way home from school they heave a deep sigh: "Today was a bust as well, huh…"

Then, while that person is sleeping, their misery leaks onto their pillow and makes it wet. And later on, during the dead of night, the trauma of one's middle school days rears its ugly head, causing that person to wake up drenched in sweat—that's the way the world works.

If a single body can release so much fluid, then it's no wonder the world gets damper.

Plus, there are heaps of people here in Tokyo. When you take the Yamanote line, the suffocating feeling pervades even during the commute to school. Since there are woman-only carriages and all, I reckon they should make fatty-only carriages for summertime. That being said, making exclusive carriages doesn't exactly make quarantining possible. Women normally rode the carriages I went in, after all.

Shrinking away as much as they could in order to avoid bodily contact with other people, the generic-faced high school girls would hold onto the hanging straps and stand together as they chatted away to their generic-faced friends.

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

"The news headlines. Uh oh, all the birds in the world are, like, dying."

"What the hell? LOL," the generic girl shot back in almost no time flat.

I also thought that what I was hearing next to me was funny. Birds of a feather drop dead together, eh? (lol) Er, that's actually not funny…

The generic girl must have thought the same way because she smiled back awkwardly in an attempt to be sociable. “Ahaha… Eheheh…” Then she turned back to her smartphone screen. “Wasn’t it the fish that were dying last time?” she spoke up in an attempt to fill the silence that had come upon them. This prompted generic girl #2, who had probably been thinking the same thing, to turn her gaze outside the window in deep contemplation.

“Ohh, what was it again? Kasumigaseki? You know, the pond… Isn’t it freaky?”

“I know, right? LOL how freaky.”

Kasumigaseki is a government district, not a pond. What the hell was up with these high school girls? LOL how freaky. Fish were dying in large quantities in Kasumigaura, the lake. Not a pond. What the hell, high school girls? LOL how freaky.

You hear about loads of birds and fishes dying every day. Not that it’s such an unusual thing, though. If you went back to the news of yesteryear, you’d assume a bunch of conspiracies were going on. Some religious shaman would link all those news stories together and come up with something like: “A guardian spirit spoke to me! This world will perish! Now in cinemas!”

People like them would have been treated like a complete joke till now, but since there’s been no end to the extreme weather and ghastly incidents, it seems they’ve been gaining a bigger following of late. Still, I’m pretty sure they’ll end up becoming a joke this time as well. Like Nostradamus’s prophecy, which

was the talk of the town long before I was ever born, or the Mayan calendar—neither of them came true.

Honestly, small earthquakes happened every day and so do mass deaths of birds and fishes, so it was all nothing more than picking up a set of coincidences and linking them all together where it was convenient. There were always accidents and mishaps happening that we didn't know about.

Basically, meaning is only created because people link individual events together. We only see what we want to see; we only perceive what is right in front of our eyes. That's why people are aware of the prelude to destruction when they are convinced that the world will perish, and so they set their sights on the end of the world.

At long last, the train reached its destination. With an ugly creak, the entire train slowed down.

"Y'know, speaking of freaky stuff, have you heard of the Random Crossroad?"

"Oh, that…"

Generic girl #1 and generic girl #2 went on talking, but they were drowned out by the wave of people exiting the train, so I couldn't hear the last part of what they were saying.

The Random Crossroad. Oh yeah, there was that dumbass story. When I got out on the platform and whipped out my smartphone messaging app, I saw that this was indeed what it was called.

As soon as I caught sight of the account name *Johanne,* the face of a beautiful girl vividly came to mind. It wouldn't have been

so bad if I just imagined her face, but when I remembered how she had given me such a piece of her mind, the effect was like a depressant. On top of that, I experienced a teensy bit of regret at showing her the scummy side I was so careful to hide from regular people, so it all felt like a bad trip on acid. They really ought to put a "dangerous drug" label on her.

It had been one week since I had gotten away from Chigusa, and since then I hadn't heard a peep from her. Even her haemorrhage-inducing popup notifications had come to a complete stop.

As I closed my smartphone and started walking, I could once again sense the humidity rising, bit by bit.

Seriously, what was up with her?

Yuu

For womankind, the washroom in the morning is the site of a vicious battleground.

The signal to begin the match lies in the exact moment when one buries their dripping wet face into a soft towel. In the blink of an eye, my face lotion was out of its bottle and smeared all over my skin. I applied the BB cream, that lifesaving product, on the tips of my fingers and slathered it across my face, feeling my facial muscles while I was at it. The face powder brought out the glossiness of my skin.

All of that was merely touching up my skin; from here, the main act would begin.

This was something I wanted to concentrate all of my energy upon, but alas, it could not be. Today was the day I was obligated to take Misa to the hospital. This was to say nothing of all the various

business ventures that I, as the chief breadwinner of the Chigusa household, devoted myself to from morning to night. I could not possibly have the time to put my makeup on properly. In the battle against time, a simple attack plan took precedence above all else.

I applied a smidgeon of brown eyeliner, tweaked the area around my eyes with mascara and eyelash curler, puckered up my lips with lip cream, and voila! The three-minute makeup challenge was complete! Time to smile for the mirror!

"Mm, how wonderful!"

The exquisitely beautiful girl in the reflection smiled at me.

According to my classmates who plastered on their makeup, my makeup methods were unfeasible. Since my parents never taught me how to do it, I might have developed the most fitting method to suit my skin.

If only I had a bit more time, I would love to pursue the proper art of makeup. I could feasibly pile on premium foundation, apply some disposable eye shadow, paint my lips with lipstick from the department store, and thus evolve into the ultimate beauty, the ideal that surpassed all previous conceptions of beauty. I could ensnare every onlooker—but alas, such is life.

The people of this world experienced a narrow escape today.

"…Onee-chan, stop talking to yourself in the washroom." Misa, who had finished changing, laughed uneasily.

Yuu

Today, the teaching hospital was dreadfully crowded.

Unknown contagions were proliferating lately, so it seemed that the number of people overreacting to a common cold was on the rise as well. Thanks to that, the patients who genuinely needed a physical exam had to put up with an unnecessarily long waiting

time. Perhaps I should have used my makeup to reduce humanity's numbers after all.

The television in the waiting room was showing a news report about a large-scale corruption scandal involving pharmaceuticals or some such thing, judging by its depiction of a premises search in a drug manufacturing company. The people in lab coats made an unpleasant sight as they fumed: *"This is an unfair investigation! The government is hiding a big secret—!"* My goodness, people who are stained by money are more trouble than they are worth.

By the time I was able to get home, I was rather behind schedule. Even if I headed for school right at this very moment, it would be lunchtime by the time I arrived.

Knowing, then, that we would stay at home afterwards, we prepared lunch. Once we finished, we sat together in front of the dining table, close as sisters could be, and closed our eyes.

"Thanks for the meal."

We offered our thanks to the land.

I could feel the sunlight poking through a gap in the lace curtains, causing the luncheon mat to warm up gently.

Today's lunch consisted of a vegetarian cream stew made with liberal amounts of carrots, potatoes and mushrooms bought in bulk at a super bargain sale. There was a teensy bit of skin left on the potatoes, but the consistency of the cream source was such that it would not be amiss in a restaurant.

That is how home-cooked stew ought to be. These days, the pre-packaged all-purpose stew might be throwing its weight about, but I invite anyone to come to my house at any time. I will show you a real stew.

Misa picked up a spoon with her right hand and pulled a plate towards herself with her left. I picked up my stew and spoon with the opposite hands in order to match her reflection. We synchronised our movements even with things like this.

As Misa blew on her spoon and brought the tip of it to her mouth, her hand suddenly came to a halt. "I think it's about time I started making things like stew and curry."

"Why is that?"

"I mean, you seem really busy in the mornings, Onee-chan."

"You should just think about yourself, Misa."

I poked my little sister on her tiny forehead. Her nose flared in surprise and she burrowed her head, an action which was utterly adorable of her.

"Aww… but still, I can peel potatoes now!" Misa cocked her head somewhat anxiously as she crammed the unpeeled potatoes into her mouth.

"Yes, you can. They're very delicious."

Before I knew it, I was patting Misa lightly on the head. I traced her forehead with my finger and covered the reddened part of it with her fringe.

Misa was the kind of girl who cared for other people regardless of her own situation. She was as kind as an angel. She was the pride of the Chigusa family. I see, so sisters really are peas in a pod. Professor Mendel was right.

Yuu

"By the way, Onee-chan. Ichihime-chan was saying something," Misa said as we were in the middle of washing our dishes, as if she had suddenly remembered something.

Ichihime-chan was Misa's classmate and a girl who often came to visit. I thought she was the world's cutest girl next to Misa in the younger-than-me-category.

"She said that there was this… loan shark kind of system? It's running rampant in the schools around these parts. How scary!"

"How scary indeed." I nodded gravely.

One could say that the never-ending supply of loan shark users is emblematic of the problems of today's youth. Loan sharks are a fact of life, and they exist because users want them to solve their problems.

"Also, about that loan shark. Apparently, you have to pawn off your used underwear!"

"—Huh?"

I could not believe my ears.

I had once considered setting up a shop for selling used bloomers and sailor outfits. However, I doubted that I, pure and perfect girl that I am, would be able to keep up continuous profits even if I were to attach bromide to my products, so I had immediately given up on the idea.

"Wait just a moment. They're lending out money for underwear?"

"Yep! I couldn't believe it. I don't get what's so fun about collecting people's bras and panties!" Misa burst out laughing as she scrubbed the dishes with a detergent-soaked sponge. The way she stamped her feet lightly gave off the look of an indifferent angel in the dark side of society. I certainly hoped for her to remain so pure and healthy when she grew up.

"A loan shark that pawns underwear, huh…"

My finance system exerted absolutely no control of that nature.

I understood now. Had my former clients seized the crutch provided by the other loan shark?

Over this last week, my investigation had, through some means or other, reached a deadlock. Yes, it had to be said that Anna-san was like a sesame seed: the more you squeeze, the more oil you get[1]. Unfortunately, no matter how much I interrogated her, she would merely cry. Maria-san, too, chose to ignore my messages entirely. When I contacted Shia-san, she also appeared to have gone missing.

This might have seemed like a trying predicament, but one could detect an unexpected ray of hope. It would have been perfect if only I had my right-hand man who was useless to society, but, well, that was another story. I had no desire to think of that particular person.

"Also, she wants you to talk with her brother. Ichihime-chan seemed kinda worried about something."

"Talk with him…?"

I tilted my head. If there was a mirror, it would have shown me looking at Misa as if she had grown another head.

Ichihime-chan's surname was Suzaku and she had only one brother, so when she said "brother", she had to be referring to none other than *the* Suzaku, the student council president.

Speaking of which, ever since we had chanced upon each other in the staffroom, I had been receiving the occasional text message from him. Things like *I want to make sure the rumours about you aren't true*, or *there's something important I want to talk to you about*, or *I don't want to judge you by what other people say.*

He was using the oldest trick in the book to approach me.

Namely, acting as if he had something important to discuss in order to get close to me. A perfect girl like me could see right through everything.

He might pull in any plain Jane with that trick, but I had no affection for the goody-two-shoes student council president. I would not deign to give a response to him this time, either.

"…I have to say, Suzaku-san really doesn't seem like your type, Onee-chan," Misa said suddenly as if she understood me perfectly. "It's the same as the plushies you used to like as a kid. The more things they had wrong with them, like torn fabric and buttons that came off, the more you liked them."

That might have indeed been the case. In the end, one's likes and dislikes are nothing more than an accumulation of subjective impressions. My world belonged only to me. My measuring stick, too, belonged only to me. Whatever I said about someone else was based entirely on my subjective impression of the world I lived in.

But still.

There was a limit to all things. There was no way I could support the worst man on the planet, someone like Kusaoka-san.

"No way. I don't know that person."

I cut off my words there, prompting Misa's eyes to widen in surprise. "Huh? Who are you talking about…?"

Realising my mistake, I hurriedly turned my face away.

Without an apron to protect me, Misa nibbled at me like a tiny turtle. "Hey, hey, who is it?! Who is it?! By any chance does it have something to do with how you've been coming home late these days?!"

"I don't know."

"I have no idea what you've been doing, but come to think of it, you've been saying you found someone really nice! I thought it was rare for Onee-chan to talk with a boy, and now look!"

"I said I don't know!" I hunched my shoulders in a huff.

Ever since that day, a corner of my mind remained fixated on him. Was it not permissible for me to charge a premium rate for lending out my brain cells, even if it was on a whim?

Honestly, what was his problem?

1 The ruling class in Tokugawa Japan used to say this about peasants.

Haruma

Honestly, what was her problem?

I was on my way home, taking the path I had just traversed that morning. The evening sun was as high in the sky as it had been in the morning, and the flow of the crowd had changed direction as well. I had a feeling I had returned to a mirror image of where I had been before, which meant that the feeling I had from this morning had come back to haunt me as well.

Honestly. What *was* her problem?

She was someone you wouldn't even put in the same category as those strange, irrational and cruel-hearted assholes who are utterly lacking in common sense and any shred of decency. She was a goddamned heretic, a loan shark, and a feminine black-hearted beauty. Somehow, I ended up praising her halfway through, shit…

To be fair, she did have a nice face. Her face alone would have merited her some degree of praise. I was willing to openly

compliment her solely on the basis of her appearance. On that note, her sweet voice and polite yet evasive words were an added bonus. The subtle scent of her perfume and organic shampoo were on the mark as well, so I gave her extra points there.

Her figure was, well, the less said about her chest the better, but since her body had nice proportions overall, those long legs and slim waist of hers were a plus. All her fine-tuned details—the way she wore her uniform, her pretty hands, her almost total lack of makeup, her smooth skin—scored well in my book.

But even if she did have those good qualities, they couldn't cover her fatal flaw: She had the traits, thoughts, principles and sensibilities of a psychopathic outlaw in a picaresque novel.

She was a goddess on the outside and a death god on the inside. The discrepancy was without a doubt a cause for disillusionment. If only I had been born as grass or a tree, I would never have to feel this way… My faith in the "Looks count for everything" creed was being shaken to the core…

Such disgruntled thoughts went through my head as I passed through the ticket barrier and trudged towards home.

In the evenings, there's an endless flow of people coming and going in town: students hurrying home, housewives returning with their shopping, noisy university students on their way out for a drink. They all walked around like colliding molecules.

The sun painted the towering buildings dark red like melting iron, and the moon was charred brown. There was something

uncertain about the air these days, and one often saw irregular colour spots in the sunset glow.

"Harumaaa."

Someone shoved me from behind as I was looking up at the sky. When I turned around, Amane-chan was waving madly. It seemed we had ended up on the exact same train.

I slowed down my walking pace slightly to match Amane-chan. "You're coming home early."

"There's a place I want to stop by," said Amane-chan, showing me a clear file folder she had tucked in her arms. Looked like some kind of pamphlets. Words like *health resort, villa* and *Hakone* danced before my eyes[1]. I wondered if she was planning to go on yet another trip with her friends.

Amane-chan had a squeaky clean personality on the outside, so she had quite a lot of friends. For the same reason, she was the type who made a lot of enemies… Even in the staffroom, she probably had quite a mix of both…

"Oh, right. Sorry, I used your name without asking."

As soon as I thought about the staffroom, I remembered how last week I had let slip Amane-chan's name in front of Kuriu-sensei. Back then, I hadn't been able to explain myself to Kuriu-sensei, no thanks to Chigusa. Amane-chan had probably been puzzled when Kuriu-sensei mentioned a lost item to her.

Or so I thought, but Amane-chan was the one who was puzzled at this very moment.

"Huh? What?"

"Uh, you didn't hear from Kuriu-sensei?" I asked.

Amane-chan's expression clouded over slightly and her mood changed swiftly. "Ahh. I'm not really that close to her. I guess you could say we don't click. She says she doesn't have a boyfriend, but she never comes to mixers or anything…"

That was probably because Amane-chan went to too many of them… Oh, and if it was acceptable to dislike someone because they didn't come to mixers, then the dark side of girl's society had to be worse than I imagined… Shucks! Why can't we all get along and be nice to each other?

As those thoughts went through my head, Amane-chan stared straight at me and made disgruntled noises. I returned her gloomy gaze with a glare of my own, which prompted Amane-chan to hit her hand against her palm.

"Ahh. So *that's* why you've been so down lately. Did you get rejected by Kuriu-san?"

"Huh?"

The hell are you spouting? Stupid Amane, I intoned, channelling as much contempt and scorn as humanly possible in the vein of T-san, who was born in a temple2.

This caused Amane-chan to nod a few times. "I was wrong, huh… Well, no surprise. Her type's pretty different from mine. She doesn't seem to be your type, Haruma."

"Oh, so now you're agreeing with me… Wait, it's weird how you're assuming that you're my type, Amane-chan," I said.

Amane-chan's feet ground to a halt. When I looked over my shoulder, wondering what the heck she had stopped for,

Amane-chan was smiling awkwardly and waving her hand as if to say, *Oh please.* "I mean, you've been a siscon for ages."

"Huh? What are you saying? You have it completely wrong…"

Still, it was normal of my sister to act so full of herself. I walked on ahead, pretty much ignoring her completely save for the occasional disgusted reply.

In response, Amane-chan quickened her pace in order to catch up to me.

"I mean, you know. You always compare other girls to me."

"In a bad way."

"That's what makes you a siscon… I know you don't dislike girls who look down on you."

"The hell? I like the Perfect Girl Evolution types—"

My words were interrupted when she started stroking my head violently. "Yes, you do. You're just not aware of it. I know you'd be overjoyed if I treated you like that."

"Um, what? Could you please stop twisting everything to suit your interpretation?"

Sure, I might have come across that way in Amane-chan's subjective point of view, but of course, that was not so from my perspective.

In this world, there is no such thing as subjectivity and objectivity, only subjectivity and subjectivity. The opposite of subjectivity was not objectivity but another person's subjectivity. Since there's no such thing as objectivity, you could have as many types of units as you liked and you still wouldn't be able

to measure anything precisely. You can only ever make a leap of faith.

Furthermore, the world isn't just made of subjective viewpoints in themselves; the clash of subjective viewpoints is what makes the world. If that were lost, the world would definitely implode.

That's why my world would implode just from agreeing with Amane-chan's point of view!

Flinging off the hand that she had been using to pet my head, I swerved off the path.

"Haruma, where are you going? Let's go home together."

"I've got something to do first. You go on ahead."

"Aww… Okay then, how about we go together?"

"No way, I don't need you tagging along. Also, you're just being a brocon," I said over my shoulder as I shooed Amane-chan with my hand, an action which prompted her to make a sour face.

Actually, I didn't have any things to do.

It was just that the thought of being recognised as a siscon by my actual sister and going home with her filled me with a terrible shame, so all I wanted to do was wander the world aimlessly.

1 Hakone is a mountainous town known for its hot spring resorts. Incidentally, Sagara Sou and Watari Wataru said they started writing *Qualidea of Scum and a Gold Coin* after taking a trip to Hakone together.

2 “T-san, who was born in a temple” is a 2ch meme. The pseudo-horror stories parody the conventions of creepypastas. While the stories begin with all the usual occult tropes, the character of T-san (who was born in a temple) usually cuts through all the crap by saying, “The hell are you spouting?” and solves the problem immediately. You can read an English translation of the original creepypasta here.

Haruma

I did the full course: I mucked around in the bookstore and arcade, did some reading at the café and loitered at the convenience store. Before I knew it, the time had flown by.

Yet even though it was close to midnight, the town remained a hive of activity.

The main street that stretched all the way from east to west was still bright. Along the road there were twinkling streetlamps and convenience stores at every intersection, as well as karaoke bars, sake stores and ramen shops. But as soon as you turned the corner into a side street, it instantly turned dark. The light from the main street only made the shadows seem even thicker.

When I thought of it that way, Tokyo at twilight may have been darker than any other city. Neither the light stretching all across the main street nor the merry-sounding voices of the students walking there reached this side road.

The only light that shone on the dark, night-time road was a dim and hazy streetlight. Also, the building lights came into view whenever I looked up.

The light that twinkled up above the world so high was not the stars but red lights. The outline of the faraway building blended into the darkness and became indistinct. Only a red flicker announced its presence loud and clear.

During the day, this backdrop was nothing worth mentioning, and I was barely even aware that a building was there, so as soon as its shape was hidden from sight, I strained my eyes to find it.

That's why what you see really is what you get, and what you hear might really be what you listen to.

Blah blah blah. I was thinking about a bunch of useless crap as I headed for home.

Since the apartments and private houses were clustered together around these parts, the road was narrow. The passing cars came by with little room to spare, and every time that happened, their headlights shone on the people walking along the path. There was a bicycle coming from the opposite direction as well as a young couple walking a few steps ahead of me. There was no one else to be seen. Compared to the main street, this was quiet as hell.

Unfortunately, because it was so quiet I could hear the couple's lovey-dovey talk in front of me.

"I'm sorry that you had to take me out all this way…"

"I really wanted to walk you home, though…"

"Oh no, I would've been really happy if you just took me to the station. Thank you so much," said the girl as she snuggled against the guy.

I couldn't see their faces clearly because it was dark, but judging from their uniforms, I guessed they were still young. University students, or maybe they were in high school? Due to the girl who had her hair tied in a bun, they gave off a cutesy vibe together. As for the guy, he looked about my age, but meh, who cares about guys.

The two of them really seemed to be enjoying their alone time; as the guy walked on the side of the road, he tightened his grip on his girlfriend's hand. I instinctively tightened my grip on my fist. Stop flirting in my neighbourhood, damn it. Yet oblivious to the anger exuding from me, the guy let out a sweet whisper.

"I should be the one to thank you for coming out all this way, Maria."

"Oh no, I like going to your room, Tsutomu…" the girl said, lifting her face.

The two of them gazed at each other. All of a sudden, their bodies were illuminated by a private house's sensor lights. Thanks to that, I got a square look at their faces. In that moment, my fists unclenched. I mean, well, there wasn't anything to get mad over!

"Plus, if I don't come over, you'll never clean your room, Tsutomu."

"My bad. Oh, and come to think of it, you're always at my place. Don't you wanna go on a trip somewhere like last time?"

"Oh, what a great idea! But I'm kinda strapped for cash…"

Whereas I'm full of hate…

A good-looking couple would have been easy on the eyes, but when a less-than-stellar couple carries on with each other, it's nothing but pollution. It's just like when that character in *Hanasaka Tenshi* reads a poem aloud[1].

When a couple makes out in public, they're doing it because they don't have confidence in their own love, and when other people give them disapproving looks, they conveniently interpret it as, "We love each other so much that people get jealous of us," as if they're seeking approval. When I think about it that way, I… I'm not jealous at all! I swear!

As much as I wallowed in excessive gloom, I was interrupted when the path forked at the corner of the street. If you were heading for the station, then you had to turn left at the T-junction. My house was to the right. Naturally, this was where we would be parting ways.

As one would expect, their voices became ever more distant as they made for the station. I breathed a sigh of relief over that and then turned the corner myself.

After that, an utterly familiar scenery unfolded before me. Whenever I passed through it, I encountered the same T-intersection every time.

Yet still, my feet stopped in their tracks.

There was no one coming along the right side of the road, and no one on the left side either. Despite that, the couple's voices became more distant as they walked further ahead.

A hole was gaping open at the end of the T-intersection, where there was supposed to be a block wall. Straight beyond it was a dim blue and black haze, flickering like a shimmer of hot air.

"If you save up money, where will we go?"

"Oh, I'm fine with anywhere."

Their phony conversation drifted further away.

The air was warping.

That applied to the dim, hazy, flickering street lights. As well as the fluorescent lights seeping out from the apartment entrance.

The red lights from the towering buildings were affected too. They flickered like an illusion on a foggy mountain, and it was impossible to see even a few steps ahead.

And yet the couple went on walking in the midst of that dark fog.

Their footsteps were entirely unperturbed, as if nothing had changed at all. They held each other's hands lovingly. All the while talking about their plans for next week.

A warped landscape, a twisted world. The more bizarre thing about this bizarre scenery before me was the two healthy individuals. They went on chatting to each other pleasantly, blithely unaware of the abnormalities. Perhaps one could say that people have such calm expressions on their faces when committing lovers' suicide.

Eventually, the two of them vanished into the darkness.

All that was left was the gaping dark hole. No, it wasn't a hole. In the place where there should have been a block wall, a gap

had appeared out of nowhere, stretching on and on seemingly into eternity.

In that case, it was better to call it a path.

Just as the couple's voices cut off, the path also wavered and disappeared.

Somehow, I forced my frozen legs to move, and when I stepped closer, I could see that it really was just a block wall. I reached my trembling hand towards it, but the rough feeling of concrete was definitely real.

There was no path there.

I touched the block wall one more time, and then stroked my cheek. The cold touch of my cheek was enough to snap me out of this utterly surreal world and back into reality.

"…What the hell?" I choked out belatedly, looking around me. Yet still, I caught no sight of that couple. They should have still been within earshot, and I had definitely been following them with my eyes until this moment, but even so, I could see no trace of them anywhere.

There was something familiar about this situation. Was this that whatchamacallit?

It is said that if you walk down the residential area at midnight holding hands with your lover, a fourth road appears at the end of a T-junction. There is no way of knowing which path is the right way. If you choose the wrong path at that point, you may never return—or something like that.

Was that story for real…? No no no no, it couldn't be. It had to be a trick or plasma or a princess's illusion or starfire…

Anyway, just for the sake of reporting on it, I took out my smartphone and punched some buttons, and then I stopped.

…This was ridiculous.

I had just been walking in a daze and mistaken what I'd seen. It was either that or an illusion brought upon by fatigue, or maybe they were imaginary friends I had come up with for lack of real ones. Now that they were gone, I might have climbed a bit higher on the staircase to adulthood! That said, the grotesque, romantic connotations of the phrase "climbing the staircase to adulthood" did come out of left field.

Going out of my way to contact someone after making a mistake was something a middle school boy would do when he reaches for excuses to text or phone the girl he likes, you know?

I should just go home already.

Damn it, I had to be seeing things because of all the crap I've been through lately.

1 *Hanasaka Tenshi Tenten-kun* is a comedy manga. One of the supporting characters, Souichiro, is really into poetry but never shows any expressions.

Why, this bond is forfeit;
And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
Nearest the merchant's heart.

– Judge

By my soul I swear
There is no power in the tongue of man
To alter me.

– Shylock

That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

– Portia

The Merchant of Venice (a Shakespearean tale)

Chapter 7
Yuu

Whenever I walk to school, I pass through a quiet residential area. I am fond of quite a few places on that road.

The cockatiel in the cage in front of the drycleaners, which had only been taught vulgar words. A cute poster on the block wall at the corner end of the street, depicting a pass where the road safety rules had run amok. A private street one could say was dedicated to illegal parking, full of trucks leaking exhaust fumes. Dilapidated houses whose windows were swamped from top to bottom with slips of paper declaring: "Repent, for Judgement Day is near at hand!"

My world, built from my subjective experience, was filled to the brim with wonderful things that took my fancy.

"…Wow." I gasped.

The wind, thick with the scent of fresh green foliage, whooshed around me and returned to the sky.

What lovely weather today. There was not a cloud in the sky as far as the eye could see. The sun, which was the colour of a smelted garnet, painted the sky faint blue like a fancy necklace. If it were on my hand, it would be a graceful accessory anyone could obtain.

Something good was bound to happen on a day like this, I thought.

The closer I got to school, the more students I saw on the road, chatting away amongst themselves. Within that crowd of people who effortlessly exemplified the concept of youth, I alone gazed up at the sky with a smile on my face.

As I hummed the cool lyrics of my beloved *Jukensei Blues* to myself, I slipped into the crowd and passed through the gate. That was when it happened.

"Chigusa-san. Can I have a moment with you?"

There was a hand on my shoulder. I wondered why. The only person who can touch me unequivocally is the partner I have chosen. That or an elderly person starved of human warmth and affection who had only three days to live.

When I turned around, a handsome villain stood before me.

"Um… excuse me, I'm in a hurry right now," I said.

It was Suzaku, the student council president. I wondered if he had three days left to live.

His lips were drawn into a thin line, and he had a bitter sort of expression on his face. Perhaps he had something on his mind. I could not lend him my wisdom, but I could lend him money afterwards. Thirty per cent interest every ten days was sufficient for Suzaku-san. He was welcome to come to the rooftop anytime.

"Sorry, I've got something important to discuss."

Suzaku-san simply would not let go of my shoulder. Was this some kind of proposition I could not back out of? I'm sorry, I've decided I won't become a model until my sister is grown up.

A number of girls around him appeared to be visibly restraining themselves.

"Suzaku is being so nice to you, so why don't you ask him what he's trying to say?"

The cake-faced girls smirked at me, looking rather like a bunch of oinking pigs. Their hollow gazes made my skin crawl somewhat.

As this was all sinking in—

"And hey, wasn't the evidence we gave enough?"

"Right, right. Have you heard what we have on you?"

What was going on? Before I could even resist, they knocked my schoolbag away. The zipper came undone, and a bunch of files came bursting out through the gap.

"What on earth are you doing?! Sorry, Chigusa-kun. Now apologise, you!" the man from planet Cool changed colour and berated the girls.

Yet the grinning faces of his followers did not change. With a petulant attitude, they snuggled up closer to the student council president and showed him the files.

"…Ah. I didn't want to believe it, but the rumours were true." Upon seeing the files, the student council president's eyes narrowed into slits. "How many are there?"

Inside the files were notes written by my friends detailing how much they had borrowed or what they had promised to pay back and plenty of other things like that. As long as I had those, they would pay up smilingly. I, too, smiled like a million dollars.

It seemed that walking around with these things on my person had come back to haunt me.

"…And what do these documents prove?" I protested vehemently.

It is possible to forge dozens of documents showing how much one had borrowed. There's no point in a minor signing such documents. After all, a contract that belied the public order and morals was completely null and void. That's why it doesn't count, I swear…!

Before I knew it, we were surrounded on all sides. Even the old man watering the flowerbed was peering at us with interest. Since they were not bringing over any authorities to intervene, I would rather

they stopped watching and vacated the place. Let us forget this ever happened!

"Could you cut it out with the jokes?" I could dimly hear the student council president berating me. "There's proof you've been threatening people. There's proof you've been lending out money. You have a duty to explain yourself right here and now. Is it true that you've been ripping people off?"

"R-Ripping people off is a matter of personal interpretation. I am not seeking the skin off their backs, and besides this is just something students do for fun, and since we both agreed to it, it's not really—"

"They didn't agree to it, and that's why you resorted to this. What's this rubbish about students having fun? We're talking about human beings."

I bit my tongue. This was why I despised this person.

"… B-But it was just a temporary measure, so don't call it—"

My voice was drowned up by all the haughty voices around me railing down upon me.

"Lalala, can't hear you, you ugly hag!"

"Speak up, you fat bitch!"

"Stop putting on airs, you slut!"

It is said that when a person with a limited vocabulary hurls abuse, it says more about them than the person they insult. When you put it that way, all those cake-faced girls were so hung up about, well, you know how it is. They described themselves perfectly.

Why did those girls have to use me as a mirror, I wonder?

The tip of my nose was burning. Tears sprang to my eyes, however much I fought to keep down my choked sobs.

That was the worst case scenario.

"Don't get cocky! You think you'll get a free pass by crying just because you're cute, huh?" they spat at me as they shoved my shoulders.

It wasn't as if I was crying because I wanted to. I have never once thought of using my weakness as a weapon.

Even if I were to argue back, I was trembling so much that I simply could not open my mouth. Instead, I found myself noticing how spiteful they appeared to me as they twisted their lips. It was as if someone had raised their hand and let the firing squad loose. They had started using my heart for shooting practice.

"Everything about you makes me sick!"

"Why don't you get on your hands and knees and apologise, you scum?!"

"Hand over your wallet and give back everyone their money, you stupid piece of shit!"

"You should try selling that cheap-ass body of yours, you slutty whore!"

"You pretend to be all sweet and innocent, but you're a rotten bitch through and through. We know you'll try to deny it, but that's the kind of shitty human being you are!"

Their sneering voices rang out like gunshots. Every time they hit me with abuse, the next shot was cocked and loaded. They shook me left and right and shoved me back and forth, eventually leaving me with as many holes as Swiss cheese.

A feeling much like heavy black tar came over me. It penetrated the walls of my outward persona, slipped into a gap in my heart and painted the interior black.

"Cut it out already! You're overdoing it. If you keep this up, you'll be just as bad as Chigusa-kun!"

The student council president's voice, along with the buzzing from the spectators, sounded awfully distant to my ears.

My vision had turned blurry, and I was unable to control my throat, limbs or heart. Invisible chains constricted my body. My unceasing tears merely continued to dirty my face. All I could think of was how pathetic I was.

Why was I powerless to do anything?

I had worked so hard to consciously reform myself into a swan, hadn't I?

For as long as I remained powerless, I was an unsightly being.

As soon as that thought occurred to me, I had the feeling of the ground slowly parting, causing my ankles to sink into a bottomless marsh. The ice-cold liquid covered my thighs, then my hips and chest, before finally crawling up all the way to my mouth like a slug. Over and over, the liquid coated my body and hardened over me, until I could not move an inch from where I stood.

This was the bottom of the sea.

A pitch black scene etched with nightmares and nothingness, where no light would ever reach.

Unable to peer up at the sky, the only thing that remained beautiful to my eyes, I was drowned out by the harsh wind until I was the only person left in the whole world.

I could hear the clasp over my stony heart snap at the seams.

Dimly, I perceived that the weak-willed and timid person known as Chigusa Yuu was quietly being crushed by the deep sea of despair, as if it was all happening to someone else.

Haruma

Like I said, I really hate ugly things.

What do I feel upon viewing an army of ants carrying a butterfly? Despite their small size, they work so very hard together to carry the butterfly like a yacht… is the kind of rosy-eyed crap that I was *not* thinking.

I only feel disgust at the fact they were turning something beautiful and sublime into food.

When you put it that way, don't you feel sorry for those ants that cling to life so desperately despite having their food taken away from them? Don't be ridiculous. Bugs don't have feelings. It's just a case of some shitty human looking down on the ants and projecting their own sense of worth onto them. I mean, why are we giving ants special treatment? What about butterflies? Or the woodlice stuck under the humid, stifling shade of a rock?

When a person says that ants have it bad and declare that they sorry for them, it's a sign of their empathy.

They're scrawny, mindless sycophants that only follow instinct and hierarchies, jealous of the beautiful butterflies that can fly freely in the sky, and thus they wait in eager anticipation for the moment the butterflies fall in order to brutally attack their weak points. They just see themselves in the ants and pile their empathy on them.

It's really ugly. I mean, I despise insects that sympathise with insects.

But the scene I witnessed in the courtyard was even uglier and more despicable than those insect forms.

Scraps of paper danced like scattered feathers as abusive words flew out of people's mouths, and all the while onlookers sneered

and watched on with interest. To add insult to injury, they even started crowding around and filming the scene with their cellphones. It was like a rubbish heap. The courtyard was a crucible swirling with the essence of evil. And at the centre of it all was Chigusa Yuu.

Last night, I witnessed something deeply unpleasant that I could not wrap my head around, so I went to school feeling absolutely terrible, only to see something even more horrifying.

Chigusa was being shoved around by the female students, tottering back and forth. The unbearable abuses came one after the other, causing Chigusa's thin shoulders to tremble and her lips to quiver. She was crying.

In this kind of situation, no one would be able to stick up for Chigusa or grab her hand and run away with her like a dashing Shonen Jump hero or romcom protag. The only kind of person who could pull off a stunt like that was someone good-looking and with powerful bloodlines, or alternatively someone who was kind to humans and animals from their bottom of their hearts, with memories of making a vague promise to a beautiful girl in his childhood.

Unfortunately, I ticked none of those boxes.

—Still, there was at least one reason why I should take action right now. There was just one, measly reason.

I didn't have any right, duty, means, precedent, motive or bond that would make me do anything for her, but even so, if I had to deal with this situation unfolding before me…

"…Good grief. You leave me no choice. Still, why me…? Cut me some slack."

…Then those were obviously the magic words (i.e. the lines I was *supposed* to say).

With a sigh, I muttered those idiotic, clichéd words that I would never utter in front of anyone. Then I stood by Chigusa's side. Chigusa, who was in the midst of sobbing, probably didn't see anything. Meh, it was better that way.

One of the girls who had been bitching earlier looked at me and clucked her tongue in disapproval. This bitch had kind of a bad attitude.

"Hey, could you not get in the way? That white knight act creeps me out. This has nothing to do with you, you know?"

"Actually, it does have something to do with me."

"Like what?" she demanded.

I responded to the bitchy girl's aggressive tone with the most affable smile imaginable.

"I'm also a v-victim of Chigusa Yuu. Not that I borrowed money off her. Gyarumi-senpai over there should remember, right? Chigusa Yuu forced me to go out with her," I said.

This prompted the bitchy girl to turn to Gyarumi-senpai. "Oh, really?" she asked casually. But Gyarumi-senpai merely played with her curls and gave a big shrug.

"Huh? Who are *you*?"

Um, it really would've been nice if you remembered me there, Gyarumin, I thought.

That was when Suzaku Reiji adjusted his glasses and turned his gaze on me.

"I remember you. As I recall, you gave off this impression of having no… how do I say it…? Energy? Personality?"

"Um, okay… I never showed any energy to begin with, but whatever. As you saw, she wasted my time and calories and made me experience spiritual agony. Plus, she threatened me and did some horrible things to me to get her way," I explained.

The bitchy girl started clutching her stomach and burst out laughing. "What a riot! Chigusa's a complete loner, right? If this background character can get so pissed off with her, she's really off the deep end! Wooooooow."

"Wooooooow indeed. Okay, how about we say that this background character is on your side too? I'll make Chigusa apologise properly, so rest easy."

"Make her grovel for us then!"

Gyarumi-senpai started clapping her hands and calling for Chigusa to grovel as if she was having the time of her life, but I could not leave Chigusa's side.

It wasn't as if Chigusa was clinging to my sleeve or anything. If there was one reason to stand up in this situation, then it was enough.

"…Nah, there's no need for that. I mean, for now I'm on this chick's side—Chigusa's side, I guess."

"Huuuuh?" Gyarumi-senpai gaped. She turned her head so sharply her entire upper body twisted, a pose that you could only describe as ridiculous.

"It's true that her personality is trash and that she's a psychopath with no communication skills who doesn't hesitate to threaten people, plus she's a peabrain who assumes she can get away with anything because she's cute. Honestly, there's just nothing defensible about her. But still…" As I enunciated each word, I glanced at Chigusa's face.

Tears and snot were pouring out from deep inside her, and she looked at me with eyes shining like sculpted glass.

"She just has a nice face. That's it, so um, yeah. How do I say it…? I really, really like her," I mumbled quickly so that nobody but me could hear it. This time, I squinted at Suzaku and the bitchy chick's faces.

Okay, let me go over my creed one more time.

There's no use for ugly hags and idiots; looks count for everything. Accordingly, I had no use for the people in front of me, nor for the people making whispering laughs in the background.

My creed is meaningful because I act upon it. In that case, my actions were set in stone. Those of you standing far away, listen up. There is nothing to lose. There are no penalties involved.

"I mean, your personality is no different from Chigusa's. After all, if you all have ugly personalities, then of course I'll side with the cutest girl. Use some common sense. Don't you know the words 'cute is justice'? Basically, it means you guys suck."

"…H-Huuuh? What the hell are you saying? Who do you think you are, you nobody?!"

The bitchy chick stomped the ground in fury, making it seem like the earth was trembling somewhat. I even felt the tremors in my spinning head. It filled me with fear and a sliver of excitement.

Vengeance is mine. Cute is justice. Now then, let's make this a story about justice.

If all vegetables taste the same, then you'd buy them based on how appealing they look. Everybody knows that people get hired based on their looks. Assuming they have equal abilities, then the better-looking applicant will get picked every time.

Actually, to put it more precisely, outward appearances and personality were originally meant to be just one parameter to express an individual's merit, but those who lacked the ability to appeal to others on the basis of good looks whined that it was unfair. They claimed that what was most important was on the inside and argued for removing outward appearances as a criterion of evaluation.

Ironically, they're the ones who have made the system unfair.

I mean, evaluating people is an extremely subjective thing, so there's no way you could seek fairness there. Some person might be nice and have a great personality and everything else under the sun, but if they weren't nice to me, then there was nothing I could evaluate them on. Between two equally nice girls, I would pick "the girl who is nice to me" over "the girl who is nice to the world".

Anyway, I'm not looking for kindness. I judge people based on outward appearances.

And Chigusa sure was cute.

Bankrupt though she was when it came to personality and her inner soul or whatever, her cuteness was her sole redeeming feature. As someone who never had anything to do with her, her cuteness was one of the few things about her that I was aware of.

It was also the only reason why I liked Chigusa Yuu.

"Haruma-san…"

I swung around at her voice. Chigusa was staring at me with a shocked and mystified expression on her face.

Being stared at that way made me feel self-conscious about the words I had uttered moments before, so I promptly looked away. At that point, my gaze fell on Suzaku Reiji, who was pinching his temples and grimacing.

"I don't quite understand what you're saying. What do you want to achieve? Could you stop pointlessly stirring up drama?" he sighed with disgust, gazing at me scornfully. This was exactly why I hated handsome and intelligent guys.

But still, this was Suzaku Reiji, who was able to bend the crowd to his will because of his handsomeness and intelligence. In that case, if I could sway this guy's emotions, then I could get this situation under control.

"Hey, don't be mean. Put in some effort and try to understand where I'm coming from. I get really nervous in front of so many people. I am the weakling, the average Joe, the victim. I have suffered so much because of my weakness and ugliness, so I

want you to save me. Isn't saving the small fry like me your job? Mr. Student Council President."

I realised as I was speaking that I was talking more and more like a character from a play. Okay, okay, right, I was just acting. Just pretending to be a villain. This was an act, so it didn't matter if he told me to get lost or that I was disgusting since my *real* heart remained wonderfully pure. In actuality, I was just as bad on the inside as those lying idiots. What was up with these elaborate self-defence measures? But if I didn't resort to all this, my chicken heart wouldn't be able to handle it!

If people can throw away their shame, get over it and stomp it into the ground, then they can achieve most of the things they want. In ninety per cent of cases, people can do something about their problems if they have money and some mental strength.

Case in point: If the two of us were to act equally shamelessly, then only I would have to cast away my dignity. A good person acting like a victim is the most powerful being as far as society is concerned. People who do horrible things when they think nobody's looking and then act all wounded when the going gets tough are effective at executing this clever plan.

That said, it was only effective in situations where it was assumed that a bigger victim did not exist.

That's why I could now sneer so cynically and pathetically.

"You listened to all those crying girls, but you won't lend an ear to someone like me? Aren't you discriminating against me on my looks? Or maybe you're sexist?"

"Knock it off. Playing the victim is a scummy thing to do."

"Could you stop being so judgemental? When you put it that way, aren't the girls crying over there scummy as well?"

Silence met my response.

Suzaku did not deny my words. In truth, inciting all that verbal abuse against Chigusa had probably not been an act Suzaku was proud of.

"They knew she was a loan shark and still they borrowed money from her. Now they can't return it, so they use you to play the debt moratorium card. Striking someone down in public is something they didn't even do in the Kamakura period."

"That's not what I'm doing! I was just making the truth clear, and if I had to use methods that would get me reproached…"

"So you mean denouncing her and convicting her?"

"…If necessary," Suzaku said heavily.

Around him, the voices of approval got louder. I see, so Suzaku was a symbol of justice, the correct embodiment of multiple subjective opinions.

Because of that, I had to use whatever means possible to turn the tables on him.

"…Then you should denounce and convict yourself."

"Huh?"

"You've been ripping your followers off too. Haven't they been investing in you?"

"Quit it with these false accusations. I haven't been doing anything like that at all. Also, it's not selfish to accept charity in the first place."

…Well, damn… Them's the breaks.

I was hoping that by bluffing and asking a leading question, I could somehow take advantage of any small crack he showed, but Suzaku Reiji was calm and self-possessed, and his innocence did not waver one tiny bit as he spoke.

His matter-of-fact attitude and upright words left me, on the other hand, at a loss for words. I'd be screwed if I fell silent here, so I did some half-assed grumbling to play for time.

"…Um, uhhh. Uh, you know. Like, you know, otaku, the types who value money and things over all else. What sad, lonely people they are. There are some things money can't buy, like time and people and feelings."

"Well, I guess… Of course, I think that comes down to personal opinion."

Awesome, this guy was an idiot. He had the biggest stick up his ass. And I guess he was normally a nice guy. I spouted nonsense out of desperation and he still gave me a serious answer. The thought of saying nasty things to such a nice guy made my heart twinge and throb with excitement.

"I know, right? That means you're even scummier than Chigusa. You rip off things that are more important than money and act like everything's fine."

"I said I don't do anything like that," Suzaku said disgustedly.

Heh. The corner of my mouth twitched upwards.

"How about keeping people waiting until you go home? You don't intend to go out with someone, but you keep leading them on. Aren't you unjustly taking something from them?"

Suzaku seemed to understand what I had said. He glanced at Gyarumi-senpai with a startled expression.

"That's something she wanted to do…"

"Ohhh? So you're not the one in the wrong if *they're* doing it? You're saying it's all right for someone to suffer and get hurt because they agreed to it. Basically, you're saying it all comes down to self-responsibility? In that case, all of Chigusa's victims ought to be responsible for themselves. You might open your eyes to the monetary theft Chigusa has caused, but you've closed your eyes to your own spiritual theft."

"That's sophistry, damn it!"

Precisely. However, sound arguments aren't the only things that convince people. Sound arguments don't get through to people who are entrenched in their position.

"You might not be aware of it yourself, but you're a bad person at heart. You take people's time, which is way more important than their money, and you squander their good will and emotions, which has far more weight than the things they own by a longshot. On top of that, you put your own influence on a pedestal and denounce others. Ha, you're the lowest of the low…"

"Your logic doesn't hold up. That kind of pointless quibbling makes no sense!" a furious Suzaku retorted vehemently.

Around him, his followers' voices rang out—a combination of "shut up!", "die!" and "shut up and die!"

I plugged my ears deftly and closed my eyes. Still, I kept my mouth open and sneered at Suzaku. Right from the start, I had zero intention of having a debate. I was fine with bitching and poking holes at him, and if that didn't work I'd divert his attention and declare victory over him.

Keh. A chuckle made its way out of my throat. "Like I said, I get nervous and have trouble saying what I mean. My communication skills aren't so good. You're a bully if you shout threats at me. Try to understand the feelings of those who don't have it so good. Think about the weaklings and how they're feeling! That arrogance of yours is what makes you the lowest of the low, Mr. Student Council President."

Suzaku rasped and let out a low groan. And then, he glared at me with eyes filled with hatred and contempt.

"You really are scum. *Kuzu*…"

I did a massive shrug in a way that all but said: *UH-HUH, YES, MY NAME IS HARUMA KUZUOAKA!*

And with that, Suzaku grabbed me by the collar and held me down, gnashing his teeth.

Yuu

At some point, I even forgot that my nose was dripping.

What pulled the trapped Andromeda out of the bottom of the sea was not the hero who fought Medusa or a prince on a white horse.

It was the traitor who stabbed the righteous student council president with his wicked fang. The despicable sneak who

pretended to be a weakling. The scum of a man whose face, intelligence and personality roamed somewhere around rock bottom. I take back what I said. His intelligence and personality were passable depending on one's perspective.

It was Kusaoka-san. Kusaoka Haruma-san.

One would think that people who unscrupulously extort money in order to gorge in excessive profits and handsome boys who unconsciously inspire love are in no way comparable. They are as different as a scalar wave and a sky tree, and yet both are forced to look down on the lower levels and make radio waves, so if anyone could compare the two, I'm sure it was him. He could do it because he was, well, you know.

When I thought about why he would go so far for my sake, the answer, of course, readily came to mind. Kusaoka-san had fallen for me in some way or another. Wasn't he madly in love with me?

I was the perfect girl, adored by the world, so of course I could readily understand how someone could fall in love with me. I was a genius for whom every task is a piece of cake, but, well, how should I say it? Somehow, it was difficult to put my feelings into words.

… I-I was blushing. Just a teensy bit.

When I saw how Kusaoka-san desperately attempted to cover for me, my heart mysteriously flushed with warmth. Though my body was covered in the deep, dark ocean, the warmth was drying every inch of me. I could not fathom these emotions. I did not know what to call them. I wondered if perhaps Kusaoka-san always experienced these feelings. How wonderful they were. *I* was wonderful. Now all I had to do was charge a heating fee.

I wiped my face with my uniform sleeve.

"Excuse me? What are you trying to pull, Mr. Student Council President? Violence spells trouble, you know. You could end up in court."

"Knock it off. If that's how it's gonna be, then anyone would know who's really in real trouble here. You don't have the luxury of making that choice."

"Oh, so that's how you're gonna be…"

I might have been scooped out from the ocean, but far from lulling, a storm was steadily brewing in the ocean as it sought a sacrifice.

If there was one thing the newly rescued Andromeda could do…

I cleared my trembling throat forcefully. I fight for the sake of other people.

"Haruma-san. And you too, Suzaku-san. Please, just stop it already…"

Neither of them listened to me.

"I'm not really against it, but are *you* okay with it, Prez?"

"…What do you mean?"

"I'm just wondering what you'll do about the fact that the student council president post takes precedence over the students. Won't there be a problem when it comes to impartiality?"

They showed no inclination to look my way. My voice failed to reach either of them. I could sense my throat constricting.

"Haruma-san—"

Yet still, I tried calling out to him in my heart. Not to Kusaoka-san, but to Haruma-san. In doing so, I mustered what little courage I possessed. *Haruma-san.* He was not Perseus, nor did he ride a

white horse; he was just a boy with a face that was… well, you know.

But on the other hand, to my eyes he was—

"Just stop it. Now!"

Weak-willed though I was, I mustered all my courage and spoke up as loudly as I could, spreading my arms as far as they could go and forcing my way between the two boys.

"This meaningless fight is over…!"

The student council president was looking at me with a dumbfounded expression. The girls experienced a cold shutdown. Silence filled the area. It was as if round moon flowers were blooming in the stormy ocean.

And Haruma-san was looking at me with his usual nonplussed expression. As for me, ah, it would have been nice if I didn't still have unseemly tears on my face, but I smiled at him as brightly as I could.

"Who's in the wrong, who started it… I find that sort of witch hunt tedious. Can we just stop it all already?"

On a beautiful, moonlit stage, I sang my song. Only the songs that I could sing could bring reconciliation and peace.

"Both sides are equally at fault. Haruma-san and Suzaku-san are both wrong. You're both scum. Can't we just leave it there? This is one world. It's a beautiful world. You're both fellow comrades on Spaceship Earth. And so I don't take any sides. Your fight is over, is it not?"

Nobody said anything. Everyone held their silence with dumbfounded expressions. Their pleasant gazes fell upon me. They might finally realise that all their fighting was futile. The

world is filled with love and peace. Imagine. Let's imagine. A world without wars.

"Right then, I will become an ambassador for peace. Make up and shake hands, you two scum…"

I hugged Haruma-san's arm tightly, as if to bring him closer to my heart. As I stretched his hand towards the student council president—

"—Don't screw with me!"

Once again, my vision became blurry. Tears and whatever else drenched my face, and the droplets trickled down my hair and chin.

It was not as if my fickle heart had plunged back into the deep sea. This was a load of actual cold water. The water had been flung at me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the gatekeeper floundering near the flower bed. He should have been holding the hose, but the tip of it was in the hands of the girl who was standing next to the student council president. As her shoulders shook and trembled, she pointed the tip of the hose in our direction.

Oh dear. To respond with such an atrocity after the referee's whistle… Just where did our Japanese sportsmanship go?

I blinked.

Haruma

…My balls were freezing off.

"What are you all doing?! Get a hold of yourselves!"

Suzaku stopped the girls, driving them all off and telling them over and over again to break it up. I could also see the elderly gatekeeper go off to call the teachers, a sure indication that

something major had happened. It was probably a good thing that all the confusion before school had diverted attention away from him.

When the hose drained all of its water on me, I turned into a drowned rat from head to toe. My rumpled, discoloured hair absorbed the water as well, making me look like a brown rat. When you're dripping with water, you also look like… What was it again? A something-or-other flying into the flame, I think?

Someone else shared that wretched state right next to me: Chigusa Yuu.

"Chigusa-kun, we'll continue this another time."

Suzaku's parting words were also drowned out by the surrounding tumult and didn't seem to reach Chigusa's ears.

A drop of water trickled down Chigusa's forehead. Similarly, her blouse was sopping wet and clung to her chest, clearly revealing the outline of a faint blue bra and lace. But Chigusa was so dumbfounded that she didn't seem to realise what state she was in. Her eyes, round like saucers, blinked in surprise, and her expression was baffled as if she had no idea what had just happened. That was Johannes for you.

"We were supposed to come together just now and become innocent children, so why did this awful thing have to happen…?"

"…Isn't it obvious?"

I face-palmed.

It was just *so* rich coming from Chigusa, to whom being the villain and the cause of all evil was second nature. As a matter

of fact, it was supremely satisfying watching her get blasted with water. When I thought of it that way, my satisfaction transcended my disgust and anger.

There was nothing else to do, so in the meantime, I face-palmed again.

As soon as I did that, Chigusa stared at me with eyes wide in surprise. As she nursed the area where she had been hit a moment ago, she opened her mouth.

"Haruma-san," she said, entranced.

"W-What. You're creeping me out."

Her voice was warmer than it had ever been, which left me a bit perplexed.

There was no edge or thorn to Chigusa's voice. As if trying to confirm that for herself, she called out my name once again.

"Haruma-san, tee hee."

Shyly, meditatively, Chigusa giggled.

“—This is BREAKING news. At 9:00 am Japan time, President Tenkawa called for an URGENT press conference. Because it is a SIGNIFICANT presentation aimed at citizens, it is thought to be related to the CRASHING of the U.S. military aircraft SQUAD.”

“—This is the DAYTIME news. At approximately 10:30 am Japan time, President Tenkawa PASSED AWAY in hospital. According to GOVERNMENT reports, President Tenkawa appointed Chief Cabinet Secretariat Rindou during his hospitalisation, who has now assumed the role of ACTING President…”

“—This is the EVENING news. At 7:00 pm Japan time, acting President Rindou announced the MASS RESIGNATION of the Cabinet members over the SUDDEN situation. Nagatachou is currently SWEPT in DOUBT and DISBELIEF. Yamamoto-san at the SCENE…”

Chapter 8
Yuu

We escaped together.

Admittedly, we did that because I did not have any clothes to change into, but it was my first time leaving school so early of my own volition. Ever since I started seeing Haruma-san, I was experiencing a lot of firsts.

"You're terrible, Haruma-san."

"Um, could you stop making it sound like I'm the one taking you? You're clearly the one dragging me…" Haruma-san laughed to cover his embarrassment.

He promptly fell into silence when we came to the front of my house.

"Is this perhaps your first time entering the house of someone of the opposite sex?" I asked him somewhat snidely.

He hemmed and hawed and mumbled some vague response. I thought it was sort of funny, so I giggled. It was one thing for this to be my first time, but the fact that it was a first for him as well evoked quite an inexplicable feeling in me.

When I opened the front door, Misa poked her head out from the living room.

"H-How did you get so wet? This isn't good!" she said in a panic as she rushed out to meet us.

Although we had dried up somewhat during the trip from school to home, our hair and clothes were still rather moist. Drops of water fell to the ground, creating tiny puddles.

Misa promptly walked off and came back with a towel from the bathroom.

"We were attacked by rioters. It's dangerous out there, so it's really best if you don't go outside, Misa." I sniffled.

"Geez, you can't pull a fast one on me!" Misa puffed out her cheeks like an angel.

Then she turned her gaze on Haruma-san as if noticing him for the first time. She became aware of his existence quicker than most people did—that's my angel for you.

There was an awkward distance between them, so I stood there with a regal air.

"Ahem, Haruma-san. This is my little sister Misa. She's just as cute as I am, isn't she?"

"Yep, she's cute." Haruma-san nodded firmly.

His enthusiasm left me nonplussed. It takes quite a lot to leave me nonplussed. Could it be that he had a propensity towards being a loli + con? What a hopeless person.

"Misa, this person will probably have nothing to do with your life after this. Make sure you observe him closely for educational purposes."

"There you go again, Onee-chan!" Misa burst into giggles, before looking up at Haruma-san with a sort of amusement. "Could this guy be Onee-chan's… heh heh?"

"…Oh please, Misa."

Lately, my sister had a peculiar tendency towards misunderstanding matters. Perhaps it was because she was now of marriageable age. I slowly beckoned Misa towards me.

"What iiiiiis it?"

As soon as she came near me, looking puzzled, I seized her in a hug. Water dripped from my drenched torso onto Misa.

"Eeek—!" A drenched Misa let out a startled squeak. Then her head started shaking in a peculiar manner, and she gazed up at me with her adorable face. "You should just get in the bath already! Geez!"

"You're right. In that case, shall we bathe together?"

"Urk."

I hit my palm with my hand, prompting Haruma-san next to me to let out a strange hiccough. Our eyes met, and in that instant we both understood.

"What does that cough mean…? My sister's the one suggesting it."

"Y-You don't have to tell me twice. In fact, it's so mundane I got the jitters."

"Nevertheless, you reacted very much. Were you expecting something?"

"I stopped expecting stuff from other people when I was in my second year of middle school. Now go take your bath already."

I giggled. "You seem rather flustered, my dear."

"Heeey, do you listen when other people are talking? Oh, and who died and made you boss? I have to admit it suits you, though!"

As the two of us flirted with each other, Misa let out a sneeze.

"Oh my," I said. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to take the bath first. Please make yourself at home in the living room."

"… Mhmm."

Haruma-san went off to the living room tremblingly, as timid as a lamb. I called out to his back and passed him a towel. "Oh right, our bathroom has two doors: one leads to the washroom, and the other is a changing room that leads to the bath. The way to the washroom is the same hand I use for holding a rice bowl, and the way to the changing room is the hand I use for chopsticks."

"Mhmm… ah, okay."

"Don't you dare pretend to make a mistake and peep on us."

"I won't."

"You absolutely mustn't. It's wrong if I say so. You understand, don't you? Things are wrong if they're wrong. That's because they're very wrong."

"What do you think I am…? Dachou[1]?" Haruma-san clicked his tongue in irritation and scowled openly.

Perhaps he was the kind of boy who liked to be amused. I could see quite clearly that he was happy. He was supposedly one year my senior, and yet to me his actions were like that of a younger boy.

I knew more about him now than I did when we first met. I would know more about him in the future. Haruma-san was still showing me new sides of himself.

Thoroughly satisfied, I went through the washroom and into the changing room.

[1] The Dachou Club is a Japanese comedian trio known for being contrarians.

Yuu

It was a daily tradition for Misa and I to bathe together like this—a ritual for us.

Misa sported a somewhat petite body even for someone of her age. Her spinal cord stood out against her back, and when I touched her thin, wiry back with my palm, I could sense keenly that this girl was still growing. She needed more meat on her bones, but perhaps her genes left her with rather scarce options.

After I rinsed her body, I ran my fingers through her soft, pliable hair. As I was washing her hair—

"Onee-chan, there's something serious I want to talk to you about," Misa spoke up suddenly in a meek tone.

"What is it…?"

"That guy you were with, umm—"

"Kusaoka Haruma-san."

"Right, about Kusaoka-senpai. There's something I'm curious about…"

That was Haruma-san for you. To think that even the angelic Misa could not hold herself back when it came to him. I wondered if perhaps I should chase him out of my abode as soon as I had finished recouping my strength.

"Answer me seriously." Misa shrugged. "Onee-chan, are you dating Kusaoka-senpai?" she cackled unpleasantly, as if she was expecting something.

"Oh my *goodness.* You've really grown up fast…" I let out a sigh on reflex.

"Come on! Tell me!"

"…If one of us felt that way and the other didn't, there's nothing that can be done."

However much Haruma-san loved me, I could not really see him as someone of the opposite sex, so Haruma-san's love was completely one-sided. Please don't cry, Haruma-san!

"Ohhh, I see…" Misa sounded let down. "And here I thought it would've been nice if he was your boyfriend…"

"Oh my, does he interest you that much?"

"Nope, not at all. But I thought you liked that type, Onee-chan."

Did this little sister of mine think I have unusual tastes? How affronting.

As she traced the bathroom towel with the tip of her tiny feet, Misa spoke up quietly. "You know, Onee-chan. You always tell me that I should think about myself. I think you should think about yourself too sometimes."

"…I do more things for myself than you think, Misa."

"I guess so. I wonder about that. You're really good at hiding your own feelings, Onee-chan. You're a really nice person." Misa gazed up at me from where she was sitting next to me. "No matter what anyone says, you're an angel, Onee-chan!" she insisted.

I could feel my nose getting pointier. How peculiar. Was it because of the shampoo? I deceive others by lathering on shampoo.

"Is something the matter, Onee-chan? Does your stomach hurt?"

"…Oh no, I just felt a little peckish, that's all. Let's have a sumptuous meal."

"Yep!" Misa laughed.

I ran my fingers through her hair over and over. I resisted my urge to hug her; I must persevere instead.

I must have persevered so much that I squeezed the bottle too much, because I ran out of shampoo. I wondered if I had enough bottles in supply to replace it.

Haruma

I just can't get comfortable inside someone else's house. It's even worse when it belongs to a girl.

For a while, I hung around the living room like a disoriented bear that had wandered down a mountain, but I did find a nice little spot to sit. Making sure not to tread on the carpet, I sat down on the floor in the corner with my legs crossed, all the while fidgeting and looking around restlessly…

I wondered if the reason I couldn't get comfortable was because of the smell, which was different from my room. My claustrophobia and animalistic sense of smell heightened my reaction time, and my gaze swept around the room in search for the source of my discomfort.

On the table lay a floral placemat, and the soft and feathery couch was stacked with cushions and plushies. On top of the wooden chest, there was room fragrance. Although the weird thing about the fragrance was that it reeked of fried pasta to me.

As I wiped myself down with a towel and meekly stayed put, I found myself getting used to the citrus scent. Finally, I took a deep breath, at which point all the tension in my body seeped out of me.

As soon as my nervousness eased, I could sense how much I was freezing… I wondered if I should go to the toilet. Yeah, I mean, it would be bad to pee myself in someone else's house. Er, it'd be bad in my own house too.

I sprang to my feet and headed for the washroom. Inside, there were two doors. Remembering Chigusa's words, I turned the left doorknob.

Right in front of me, a buck naked Chigusa looked over her shoulder at me.

"…"

"…"

It seemed that she had just gotten out of the bath, because droplets of water appeared on her flushed, faintly pink skin. They gave off the illusion of sparkling, almost like spangles, and

her wet black hair was simply captivating. As each droplet fell with a plop, they traced her body, emphasising her womanly curves.

It was like a fabled scene from a painting, except it was more artistic than a work of art. Instinctively, even the sight of this primordial beauty with a shampoo bottle appeared to me like a pure virgin holding up a water jug.

I was shocked and awed—or you might say a certain part of me was moved. As I stood there in silence, my eyes met with Chigusa's.

Chigusa didn't scream or hide herself; she just blinked, and then gazed dimly at her own body as if it was some kind of strange object. The next moment, I could see that the she turned bright red like a ripened fruit, all the way from the back of her neck (at least, what I could see of it through her hair) to the tip of her ears.

After that, I came back to earth and closed the door ever-so-slowly in retreat. I could not comprehend what I had seen… What on earth was that? Another illusion?!

I took a step away from the door… Okay, take a deep breath. How the hell did that happen?

I pretended to hold chopsticks with my right hand and quickly made the shape of a bowl with my left hand. This has nothing to do with anything, but I get the feeling that the shape you make with your palm is smaller and shallower than the bowls you regularly use… I could've sworn I'd seen a bowl around this size very recently.

Just to confirm, I opened the other door, and there was the toilet.

WHY?! WHY A TOILET?! I gripped my head in confusion. *WHYYYYYYYYYYYY?! NOOOOOOOOO!* I did a Fujiwara Tatsuya impression as I flung open the door[1].

I had been fooled by my memories of what I had just seen.

When I looked over my shoulder, Chigusa's face had appeared behind me.

Her redness from before had vanished, and the colour of her cheeks was completely back to normal. Beneath her face, I could see her bare shoulders and arms, along with the edge of her chest.

"About lunch, Misa says she wants to have beef," she said carelessly, and then closed the door with a smile like Mona Lisa in the art gallery at night.

"…O-Okay," I responded, gazing at the door vacantly for a while. Only when the remaining scent of her shampoo and Sabon body scrub was gone did I finally stand up.

It was clear as day that behind that smile of hers lay a threatening intent. Since she had mentioned lunch, then I could guess what she wanted from me. It all came down to time.

Meat, yes, meat. Right. As I repeated the order to myself, I headed off to Seijou Ishii, still dripping wet[2].

[1] Fujiwara Tatsuya is a popular actor, known for his hammy roles, including Light from the live action *Death Note* movie and Shuya from *Battle Royale*.

2 Seijou Ishii is a popular supermarket chain.

Yuu

"Meat, meat, yay for meat!"

Misa was tapping the edge of the table to the rhythm of some kind of marching song. *Ratatatat.* The sight of her swaying her head repeatedly as she stared at the mountain of roast beef with sparkling eyes was utterly adorable, just like a toy marching band. Should I not write a proposal to include my little sister, a bona fide angel, into the pantheon of religious paintings?

"All right, I have to start off with ponzu1! Could you please pass the ponzu?"

"Haruma-san, Misa wants you to pass the ponzu."

"…Kay."

Sitting across from Misa was Haruma-san, who had recently gotten out of the bath. He smelled of our shampoo. He was like some kind of cat or dog marking his own scent. He handed me the seasoning from the table, which I passed on to Misa.

"Thank you very much, Kusaoka-senpai!"

"Haruma-san, Misa is expressing her thanks."

"…Um, just so you know, I am Japanese so I can understand the Japanese language. You don't need to interpret for me, you know?" Haruma-san scratched his head and expressed his dissatisfaction with utter impertinence. He ought to know his place. In a feudal system, there are relationships in place where messages are conveyed via proxy.

"I'm sorry. Onee-chan's shy around people, so she sometimes goes into weirdo mode."

"Haruma-san, Misa feels an unpleasant gaze, so she would prefer it if you did not get close to her."

"You're failing at that whole diplomatic policy of not imposing your own opinions on the message…"

Haruma-san said something very clear and perceptive, but our relationship was not particularly global in such a manner. This was simply crisis management. I did not want my adorable sister to be exposed to the fangs of a wild beast.

I divided the roast beef between the three plates and passed out a rice bowl and chopsticks for each of us. Misa held the rice in her left hand while I held it in my right; we were a mirror image of each other.

"Oh, so you're left-handed…" Haruma-san muttered to himself, staring at this arrangement of ours as if he had come to some kind of realisation.

"What about it?"

"Oh, nothing." He looked to the side, as if he was worn out.

I care little about whether another person is right or left-handed, but perhaps he had made a point of finding out this information out of his love for me. My goodness, these adolescent boys are unabashedly driven by their carnal desires even in broad daylight.

"That reminds me, you have a fondness for this kind of meat, don't you?"

"I picked it, so yeah."

"I thought boys were drawn to fleshy meat."

"When they're young, I guess."

"But you're different, Haruma-san."

"Mmm, guess so."

"When it comes to what you touch and look at, you prefer it when they're not too big. You didn't appear to have much interest in Kuriu-sensei." I smoothed over my wrinkled blouse and smiled winningly. When I thought of it that way, I felt as if I could forgive this beast today for a lifetime of actions. How benevolent I am.

"If that's what you think… Well, whatever." Haruma-san smiled resignedly.

"…I don't really get it, but it looks you two've made up!" Misa looked at us and smiled with genuine happiness.

And then—

"Let's eat!"

The three of us began feasting on a peaceful meal, all smiles.

1 Ponzu is a kind of citrus-based Japanese sauce.

Haruma

Just as I thought, meat without extra fat is perfect and supreme. It's nice to have fatty meat occasionally, but you know how curry is good and all, yet osechi is a once-in-a-year treat1? I feel the same way here.

As our stomachs digested the beautiful sisters' home-cooked roast beef, the three of us let out sighs of satisfaction.

At that moment, Misa leapt to her feet somewhat vigorously. "I'll do the dishes today!"

"All right then, I'll help you…"

As Chigusa stood up as well, Misa stopped her with her hand. Then she struck an enthusiastic pose, evidently full of motivation. "You don't have to! Leave it to me! I love cleaning and doing the dishes!"

"Oh really? Then I suppose you can do the honours. Ah, but you're still not allowed to clean that dirty thing over there, okay?"

Yeaaaah, Johannes's finger was pointed straight at me… And wait, what did she mean by *still*? Don't tell me she was still mad about that changing room thing.

Whether or not she understood Chigusa's words, Misa nodded with a sheepish expression on her face and trotted off towards the sink. As I watched the pajama-clad Misa go off, a sudden thought occurred to me. "Oh yeah, is Misa-chan having trouble at school?" I asked.

We had played truant and escaped from school, having been expelled from paradise, but anyway, it bothered me that Misa was still at home.

Chigusa sighed. "Misa has a weak constitution, so she takes a day off from school whenever she's feeling under the weather."

"Ohh… right."

Looking back, I did recall seeing her in the nurse's office. I also got the feeling that Amane-chan had mentioned something about her. I got the impression that I'd said something intrusive, so I was at a loss for what to talk about.

Meanwhile, Chigusa chuckled. “Not to worry. I looked for somewhere where she could rest and take care of her medical issues, and I achieved my goal. If I take care of the money, there’s no problem,” she said matter-of-factly. She laughed as if the whole thing was extremely obvious.

“…Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is. Have you fallen in love with me all over again? Would you go to the ends of the earth for me?”

“Nope.”

Chigusa shut her mouth, disappointed. But still, she had never uttered a word about any of this until now. If she turned that into an excuse, it would just make people look down on her out of pity.

If anyone knew this fact, then of course they would think of her that way. That she must have given her all for the sake of her little sister, or that she must have had compelling reasons for doing what she did, or that she didn’t want to use her little sister as a pretext, or that she had something she wanted to protect even if it meant sacrificing something else along the way.

“If my situation was common knowledge, there’s no doubt your affection for me would increase. What a pickle. What kind of beautiful girl would I become?” Chigusa played with her hair bashfully. It could have been a genuine attempt at covering her emotions. Or maybe it was just her bona-fide psychopathic self.

But let’s be clear—I don’t care about that. Doesn’t interest me.

Her circumstances or reasons were not important to me in the slightest. It’s not like I would feel compelled to help her out if I

knew about her home life or backstory. That was all just background noise to me.

It's just that Chigusa had a cute face. Her cuteness was enough to make me do anything for her. That's the only reason why I would take any action.

That, my friends, is a man's true ambition, his true worth.

As I could feel a bit of pride in my creed swell, I looked at Chigusa's face. At that moment, Chigusa rummaged for something under the table and brought it out.

"And with that, I present you Kamon's Little Helper!"

Chigusa was patting a giant glass jar with a "piggybank" label stuck on it. Inside, there were coins and a wad of bills, and to top it off, there was an entire wallet lumped together with everything else.

"Er, by Kamon, don't you mean Tatsuo2? And hey, isn't that my wallet?!"

So Chigusa was the one who seized my money for the sake of her little sister… That might make her seem like Gon, the Little Fox, but her methods weren't exactly praiseworthy3.

I reached out for my wallet, which Chigusa had confiscated at some point while I was in the bath, only for her to hide it as if it was her baby.

"This is a resource I unearthed on my private property, so evidently the ownership rights belong to me. My possessions belong to me, and your assets are mine."

"It'd be nice if you could see me as something other than property."

"*Non*! Money makes the world go round! Money! Harasho!"

"I think you mean Hamasho[4]…"

Why was this chick into all these old-timey acts? And while we're at it, holding someone up and taking their money is pretty old-fashioned as well.

"Haruma-san, Jump! Jump, please!"

"Wait till Tuesday. Plus, all my loose change is in my wallet, so I don't have a penny on me. Not to mention I can't even go home if you don't return my wallet."

"…That is a problem," Chigusa said after some deep thought. Then, with a genuinely pained expression, she reluctantly pulled out a crumpled 1000 yen note from the jar. Her hands were trembling as if she *really* didn't want to hand it over…

Er, just return my wallet already.

Slowly, very slowly, Chigusa's hand moved at the rate of five millimetres per second, and just when I was about to take the money, the table began vibrating.

"Whoa! What was tha—!" For a moment, Chigusa flinched, and then she calmed down. "Ah, Misa, you got a text. Your cell phone just rang," she called out to Misa-chan as she put the 1000 yen note back in the jar as if nothing had happened.

"Onee-chan, could you look at it for me?"

"Sure."

Upon hearing Misa's languid response from the distance, Chigusa put the glass jar neatly back under the table and reached out for Misa-chan's cell phone. Er, could you *please* return my wallet already?

"What on earth…?"

When she looked at the cell phone, Chigusa's eyes turned wide. Then she showed me what was on the screen.

1 Osechi refers to traditional Japanese New Year foods.

2 A reference to Kamon Tatsuo, a popular singer-songwriter.

3 Gon, the Little Fox is a Japanese children's story. Gon steals things and gives them to others, naively believing that he is helping people, and is eventually shot in the end. You can read a translation of the story here.

4 Hamasho is Hamada Shogo's nickname. He released a song called "Money" in 1984.

Haruma

Hello.

How is your health these days?

I looked into that matter you were talking about in the nurse's office the other day, and I found one or two possible candidates. If you are interested, why not take a look while you're in the area? I suspect you might need to stay the night, so please prepare plenty of undergarments just in case. You needn't worry about money.

Lately, there have been strange rumours floating about (i.e. young girls going missing at night), so for safety reasons I will pick you up in my car.

Let's talk about the particulars of our meeting again tomorrow, Misa-san.

I believe that your sister will be delighted when you're able to do many things by yourself. Let's keep this a secret for now so that we can give her a nice surprise.

Yuu

Kuriu-sensei was written in the sender column. I could only imagine one person that could be. Haruma-san's homeroom teacher, whom we had interviewed the other day at school.

"…Weird…"

"How very peculiar…"

There was silence for a while, and then Haruma-san and I gazed at each other's faces and nodded. Before the words even left our mouths, we could see what the other was thinking. We, who had surmounted many difficulties by leaning on each other, understood each other better than anyone else could.

We opened our mouths in unison.

"The Random Crossroad."

"My beloved Misa."

We diverged right from the very outset.

I made a shocked and betrayed expression, only for Haruma-san to respond with something utterly nonsensical. "Come on, she mentioned the Random Crossroad! She said, 'Someone's been spreading the rumours around,' but she's clearly doing it herself!" That rubbish had nothing to do with the main topic at hand, so it was neither here nor there…

More importantly, the fact that Kuriu-sensei was propositioning my beloved Misa was an earthshaking development. I wondered just when they had come into contact with each other.

"Er, you could say she's just looking out for others too much," said Haruma-san.

"Is there really a teacher like that these days? That kind of passionate teacher who looks out for students outside the classroom was captured and wiped out last century."

That's not all. I frowned hard.

"It's strange that she would keep such an important thing from me. If she is going to involve herself with something that means the entire world to me, then she ought to go through a provisional check with me first, am I not right?"

"What you're saying is completely retarded, but the logic is correct, at least." Haruma-san folded his arms and tapped his forehead. "Okay, so if what you're saying is true, then what is Kuriu-sensei after? Why would she take your little sister out and keep you in the dark?"

"She seems to be aware that Misa has no money…"

We squinted hard at the LCD screen. One word came to surface.

"Undergarments…"

Undergarments? Haruma-san parroted, to which I explained to him the matter of the underwear business. It was a rival in the financing realm.

"I don't know what Kuriu-sensei is up to, but perhaps we had gotten close to the truth that night."

"Weren't you the one who said Kuriu-sensei was definitely *not* up to something?"

"Psychologically speaking, Haruma-san."

"Hmm?"

"Loudly proclaiming another person's subtle mistakes seems to be an expression of sexual desire: 'I want to conquer that person!'"

Being the frail girl that I am, I hugged my shoulders in fear, upon which Haruma-san let out some kind of beastly roar.

Perhaps he was conflicted between human reason and his beastly instincts.

There there. I stroked his head out of the kindness in my heart. The rough feel of his hair increasingly struck me as that of a beast. He appeared to have lost his wallet, so if I were to let him into my spacious garden, I would be letting him run free.

"Misa is an unsuspecting girl, so I suppose she'd nod along to whatever a teacher says. There's not a moment to waste! Haruma-san, my pet, let us hurry and carry out an investigation!"

"What did you just say? Why are you petting me?"

For precaution's sake, I deleted the text message, and then stood up firmly.

"Misa, I have to do something outside for a bit! If I get back late, could you go to bed ahead of me?"

"Roger. I'll hold the base, so you two can go take your sweet time together." Her carefree voice sounded from the kitchen.

I nodded, and then looked over my shoulder at Haruma-san. He should have been raring to go, but for some reason he seemed awfully subdued.

Nevertheless, I summoned my courage and gently asked him a question.

"I have free time after this." I paused. "Haruma-san, have you time to spare?"

Haruma

"I have free time after this." She paused. "Haruma-san, have you time to spare?"

Chigusa asked me a very Chigusa-like question in a very un-Chigusa-like manner. But it was different from that day. Instead of holding onto a personal alarm, she was holding onto my sleeve.

It was the first time Chigusa Yuu had ever uttered a genuine desire of her own, a pure wish that resembled a prayer.

And so I answered with scummy words, but with a gentle voice that no scum would ever use.

"…Do I look like it?" I said.

Chigusa put a hand to her mouth and giggled, nodding as she did so.

With that brief conversation exchanged solely through smiles, we left the house together.

The red-lit moon peered down at us from behind the clouds. The hazy clouds shifted form as they drifted away towards the east. In the west, the evening glow was spreading inexorably, and it was hard to tell whether the sun was setting. Yet vermillion turned scarlet to crimson to pink.

The various mix of hues and shades came off as hauntingly beautiful.

My eyes flitted to the girl walking next to me.

Her jet black hair sparkled through the light of the setting sun, and her white porcelain cheeks were dyed pink as if she had put on rouge.

As usual, Chigusa walked ahead at her own pace, not bothering to tell anyone where she was going. I called out to her from behind.

"So, uh, where are we going?"

"We're going to talk to Kuriu-sensei, Haruma-san," said Chigusa, turning as if she was performing a waltz, which caused the hem of her skirt to flutter lightly.

When finally we reached the nearest station, Chigusa headed straight for the ticket machine. *So people still use those relics from an ancient past, huh…?*

Chigusa seemed to have guessed what I was thinking from my expression, because she spoke up stiffly. "I cannot trust that IC card. I don't know how much money it's taking away from me."

"Oh, okay… Well, I use a card, but…" I shoved my hand into my back pocket, only to realise that my wallet wasn't there. "Oh."

When I looked at Chigusa, she sighed in mild exasperation. Then her whole face lit up with a smile as she pulled out a long black wallet. "My goodness, Haruma-san, you're so helpless. I'll lend you one, all right?"

"You realise that *is* my wallet…"

This psycho loan shark bitch. I wondered if it would be okay if I beat the shit out of her right here and now.

Haruma

From Tokyo we took the train and got off in the backlands of Saitama at Chigusa's say-so. The ground smelled strongly of thick, green grass. The mountain covered the area in a dark

shade, but the path leading from the front of the station glimmered with the evening light and hazy sheen of old streetlamps.

We walked for a while after getting off at the station. When I looked over my shoulder, I couldn't see the low buildings anymore, and when I looked in front of me, the land was filled with rice paddies.

On the winding path behind the private residences, frogs croaked in that hazy area between the fields. I could not see one flicker of uncertainty in Chigusa's steps. Finally, after passing a cluster of houses, we came upon a house that was disconnected from all the others.

When Chigusa swaggered up to the house and checked the nameplate, it did indeed say Kuriu.

"…You sure know your way around here," I said, half-surprised as well as half-intrigued.

Chigusa cocked her head questioningly. "Doesn't everyone know where Sensei lives?"

"No, they don't. This isn't the Showa era…"

Back in the old days, teachers and students knew each other's personal information, apparently. It'd be unheard of these days to carry around a sheet of paper with everyone's phone number and address written on it.

We tried ringing the bell on the Kuriu residence door, but there was no response. We circled the perimeter, but we couldn't see anything resembling lights even when we peered at the

windows on the first and second floors. It was dusk time now, so there should have been at least one light on…

"It appears she's not at home. That's more convenient for us, though." Chigusa tried turning the doorknob, but it was locked, as you'd expect. "Urk…"

Chigusa moaned in frustration and tried the same thing all over again like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. *"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!"*

Well, it wasn't like I couldn't understand her aggravation. Depending on the situation, I'm pretty much guaranteed to get aggravated when some suspicious person makes eyes at Amane-chan. Er, not that I'm a siscon or anything, though.

I glanced around to get my bearings about this place and then put two and two together. "This house is quite some distance away from the others. There's no traffic at all either."

"Indeed. Haruma-san, if you were to infiltrate the house and shout for help at the top of your lungs, no one would notice."

I sighed. "Idiot. Even if I was with my class in a big town, no one would notice me if I looked for help."

"I think that's just because they're all trying to sever their connections with you, Haruma-san…"

Chigusa made a sound argument, but I decided to ignore her. People use sound arguments when they're trying to blame others, not for listening.

"Meh, no one'll notice if there's no one around." I paused. "Okay, should I chuck a rock at the window?"

I mean, come on, this was Saitama. Hardly anyone lived around here, so making a huge racket was no big deal! If there was some kind of noise, they'd probably be suckers and say, "The wind sure is playing up today, how spiffy!" The same action would be dangerous if we were in the sprawling metropolis of Chiba.

As I looked for a conveniently-sized rock, Chigusa's eyes met mine.

"Hm? What are you doing? If you throw a rock, believing that dialogue is useless, doesn't that make you a savage who wandered here from the Stone Age?"

"I don't wanna hear that from you, damn it. It can't be helped; the door's locked. Besides, they say that when in Rome do as the Romans do."

"Haruma-san, what on earth do you think of Saitama…?"

I think it's the third-lowest prefecture in Kanto. North Kanto? Never heard of it. Is it different from South Tohoku? I, a seedy guy who was born and bred in Tokyo, am fond of the city of Tokyo. I don't like how Kanagawa pretends to be trendier than Tokyo even though the only city it has that's worth mentioning is Yokohama. On that note, Chiba attaches "Tokyo" to so many different things that you can't help but respect Tokyo and see it favourably. I don't know a thing about Saitama. What does it have going for it? Manju?

As I searched for another rock, deep in thought, Chigusa let out an exaggerated sigh of exasperation. She rustled her hand in her pocket and made a triumphant noise as she pulled out a screwdriver along with some other kind of contraption.

"You can just do it like this, Haruma-san. If I use this magic screwdriver and magic wand… oh my, just like that!"

Chigusa shoved the flathead screwdriver and slender contraption into the keyhole and startled jiggling them around.

"Isn't that a crime…?"

"It's magic."

"I see, so it's magic…"

At length, the door opened with a hard click. *Open Sesame…* Was this how this chick got onto the school roof…? I see! Miracles and magic are real!

"Now then, shall we proceed?"

Chigusa pointed at the door, cool as a cucumber.

Yuu

As soon as we snuck in the front entrance, our bodies stiffened.

The light from the streetlamps came through the doorway, revealing a sea of shoes. Boots, loafers, slippers, sneakers, court shoes, gym shoes… An unusual amount of shoes were scattered across the narrow entranceway. Did a centipede live here? Could it be that Kuriu-sensei's human form was some kind of gimmick? I'd always thought that her proportions were way too different from that of regular humans. It would come as no surprise if she wasn't human.

"The hell is this…?"

Haruma-san scowled as he pulled on the door of the shoe box, causing another one or two shoes to fall to the floor.

"…There was a Filipino President's wife who collected shoes. Marcos… Reverend Marcos X?"

"Close enough. Haruma-san, I advise you not to carelessly touch those shoes with your bare hands," I reprimanded him in a hushed tone as I put on some worn-out cotton gloves.

When I ran my eyes down Haruma-san's shoes, they seemed to be a brand new early summer model. Judging by how he had purchased his shoes from a mass seller, I could see that he did not necessarily have a lover. I gave this matter some thought, and then picked up the shoes and pointed up the hallway.

"The police are rather strict these days, so you'd best stay vigilant."

"…So what is your occupation, may I ask? Could it be that you have an interest in something other than being a loan shark, ma'am?" Haruma-san cracked a joke, although now was not the time for it.

Just from closing the door, the lights cut off. A tense silence returned to the room.

In the depths of the hallway, where it was impossible to see one inch ahead, a thick and swirling darkness pervaded. A primal fear etched deep into my very being hovered in the background.

"Haruma-san, your hand."

"Hm?"

"Flashlight. Swiss Army knife. Gauze. Chloroform. Stun gun."

I put out my hand numerous times, but I never received a single thing that I sought. Haruma-san was merely standing stock still.

"…If you didn't bring a single magic tool, what did you even come for? Have you no sense of self as a magician?"

"M-M-M-M-M-M-MAGIC? Sure, I use magic. Don't underestimate me."

"Hmm? Haruma-san, sometimes you tremble at the oddest things… Is there something you find unpleasant about magic?"

"…Don't worry. It was just a reference[1]."

"I don't quite understand, but don't be disheartened. There's plenty of time before you turn thirty and this and that happens2."

"You *really* don't get it, do you?"

We whispered to each other as we carefully lit up our feet with our smartphone apps. We relied on that to stealthily advance forward.

On a side note, I know that stealth is important, but what about the advancing part? The idea of us two wannabe magicians coming in the darkness sounded an awful lot like sexual harassment, Haruma-san.

I will whip out a note from his wallet and replace it with a receipt. Yoink.

Quietly, we opened and shut each door, observing the layout of the house. The kitchen, bathroom, washroom and so on were concentrated in the wet area to the right, while the wall to the left stretched on further. From the house's outward appearance, one would have thought that the right-hand side would have had more space, but I could not detect a passageway on the left-hand side that would make it easy to come and go. It brought to mind a giant partition in a submarine or the painted cage of a prison.

"…"

I even thought I heard a sobbing voice on the other side of the wall. Of course, to me it was the sound of a shaking willow or something like that. I don't have a shred of belief in unscientific nonsense such as urban legends or the occult, so I was not one bit afraid of any ghosts.

"Since we've gotten this far, we may as well walk in single file."

"Huh, why?"

Because I am tired of being his equal, you see. Haruma-san was ahead while I stayed behind him. The vanguard and the rearguard.

A horse and a rider. A bullet and a gang leader. A tail and a lizard. That sort of thing.

"Um, it's hard to walk…"

Unfortunately, Haruma-san frowned as if he was rather afraid of the dark, so I pressed my body against his back. I yanked his shirt sleeve so vigorously that he might never be able to wear it again, and I was determined never to let go no matter what transpired. Good, that should put Haruma-san at ease. My goodness, he was such a scaredy-cat. It will be all right, my dear. There, there.

"—Stop."

"Eeeeek—?!"

All of a sudden, a hand came up in front of my eyes. I was so astonished that my soul slipped out of me. As a shriek escaped my lips, a large hand clamped over my mouth. When I protested, the hand covered my mouth even more, sucking me in. So it was true that humans are more frightening than ghosts. I yielded to him, thoroughly at my wits' end.

"…Over there."

Haruma-san was thrusting his chin down the hallway at the door to the right.

Could it be that someone was there? I could hear low bass notes passing through the slight gap in the door. Or was that the sound of my heart? I could not tell the difference. I had to make haste and stop my heart. I also had to come back to life and stop the person next to me.

I could hear the sound of Haruma-san gulping.

Of all things, he poised himself to enter the room with almost no hesitation. Without a stun gun or chloroform, it was as if he was standing up against his foes like a human centipede in a prison.

This was all most certainly peculiar. He possessed neither miracles nor magic. If something happened to Haruma-san's body, what would I do? I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't be able to handle it if I lost Haruma-san. He ought to at least have a third-party contract with an insurance teller.

"I found the switch. I'm turning it on."

"Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!"

As my panic switch turned on, so did the electric lights.

Inside was a room large enough to fit six tatami mats. There was ivory-themed wallpaper and carpet, as well as a matching wardrobe and the vague outline of a dressing table. In the very centre of the room was an ebony sideboard and a bed… wait, a bed?

The bed was not made of wood. It was not hooked up with pipes either. There was not even a mattress or a quilt; it was simply made of cloth.

Short, frilly, easily contracted, fragile, in dire need of repair, and certainly not normally seen in a place such as this—it was a pile of regular underwear. The sheer volume of bras and panties made a small mountain.

And stretched out in the middle of it all was Kuriu-sensei. Sensei, who had been sleeping soundly, appeared to have been stirred by the light, because she rubbed her eyes repeatedly with the cloth of a nearby bra.

Then, at long last, she slowly opened her eyes.

"Mmm, who is it? Shia…? Didn't I tell you not to barge i—"

The moment Kuriu-sensei's eyes fell on us, her mouth and eyes widened in a flash, and I could see her throat constricting.

Also, I could see that instead of a nightcap, she was donning a pair of panties.

What on earth?

1 He quotes *Final Fantasy VI*, specifically the scene when Edgar and Locke first sees Terra using magic.

2 According to a certain Japanese internet meme, people who remain virgins past the age of 30 will become wizards.

Haruma

What on earth…?

The shocking sight of the once alluring Kuriu-sensei caused my eyes to sting. That was not a metaphor; something was flashing before my eyes over and over.

When I finally looked towards the source of the light, it was coming from a smartphone camera held by a person smiling in utter glee: Chigusa Yuu… What on earth?

I wasn't the only one thinking that. Kuriu-sensei's expression was also etched with despair.

"Kuriu-sensei, could you please explain yourself in detail?" Chigusa said as she pointed at the floor. Presumably at what was lying in a heap there.

"Er, uh, Chigusa-san. This is, um…"

Kuriu-sensei, who had crawled out of the mountain of underwear, attempted to retort with words that weren't actually words, but Chigusa went on smiling, not bothering to listen. With a truly delighted expression, she went on snapping photos with her smartphone. What an evil smile…

Kuriu-sensei barked like a seal and obediently took a seat. She was already on the verge of tears.

"Before we begin, may I take those panties off your head?" Chigusa said.

As she wiped tears from her eyes, Kuriu-sensei slowly took the panties off her head and folded them neatly. Once she had examined them with her own eyes, Chigusa simply took out her smartphone once again.

"You understand the situation, don't you?" Then slowly, she said, "Now then, could you please explain yourself?"

"I haven't done anything wrong… This is just, um…"

Far from loosening her tongue under the threat of photographic evidence, Kuriu-sensei rather missed the point.

Chigusa sighed and pointed at the floor. "Then what about this mountain of undergarments? They don't belong to you, do they? Just from sight I can tell that none of them appear to match your size, Sensei."

"This is, um, a fair transaction. Articles of consideration. Those girls pay quite properly, and um…"

"You mentioned Shia just before, but isn't Shia-san supposed to be missing? Why mention her name? And also, how do you explain the sheer number of shoes? What is the reason behind the unusual structure of this house? What is the combination of your safe?"

Chigusa's interrogation was unrelenting. She unleashed a bunch of questions in rapid succession, going on so endlessly that I got the feeling she slipped in a completely unrelated question there!

"If you're talking about Shia-chan and the others… they're over there."

Kuriu-sensei's shoulders suddenly slumped as if she had gotten the picture, and she pointed to the other side of the wall.

So she finally cracked, huh…? The power of intimidation really was something to be feared. The fact that Chigusa went on pressing her about every tiny detail caused Kuriu-sensei to answer in a subdued tone.

But there was one thing I was not satisfied about.

"…Um, why did you go to these lengths?"

"It's a simple matter. Kuriu-sensei loves the underwear of cute girls. She's just the same as you, Haruma-san."

I'd meant that question for Kuriu-sensei, but Chigusa was the one who answered me. She waggled a finger at her lips as she announced the correct response… I mean, well, I definitely didn't *dislike* panties!

Kuriu-sensei was merely nodding weakly like a doll whose string had been cut. Gone was her once calm and cheerful self; she even looked rather pitiful. Chigusa's attitude might have been the same.

"Why did you never say a word to me…? If only you'd told me how much you were suffering, I would have done anything for you, Sensei!"

Chigusa's voice as she spoke to Sensei was somehow gentle. Her voice, too, was becoming passionate and affecting.

"It's embarrassing and I feel very uncomfortable about it, but I might have sold numerous undergarments! Depending on the price, I might have even created an exclusive market of steady supplies in full operation!"

"Er, that's not what this is about…"

Why did that sound like a proposal for a startup business? She looked in Kuriu-sensei's direction, hoping to convince her, hoping to give her a pep talk, hoping her words would reach her. Sensei, for her part, was smiling sort of sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, that's out of the question. You're not my type, Chigusa-san…"

"Pardon me?!" Chigusa shrieked hysterically.

"Um, Sensei, that really isn't what this is about…"

"Indeed. That is not what this is about. I have absolutely no understanding of Kuriu's story or hobbies. The meaning is absent," Chigusa said, huffing. Wow, so upon realising that Kuriu-sensei didn't like her looks, Chigusa dropped the honorifics… That's Johannes for you!

Chigusa spoke lightly in jest, but a shadow came over Kuriu-sensei's face as she listened silently to those words.

"You're right. Nobody, and I mean nobody, understands me… I just wanted to do what I love without causing anyone trouble… So I spread the Random Crossroad urban legend and gathered the girls at this paradise… I just wanted to live in happiness with pure and sweet girls…"

She started off muttering her words, but before long she ended up lacing every word with heavy emotion.

"Nobody understands me! Not the things I value! Not my world!"

Her howl of grief echoed across the room.

She had unique tastes and hobbies, or, you might say, a tendency towards sexual deviancy. That sort of thing would not be accepted by everyone. As for me, I barely understood a single thing Sensei was saying. I'll be blunt. She was strange.

Even if she went to many lengths to keep it to herself, there was no one who would understand an unsolved problem.

The room had returned to silence, but Chigusa took a firm step forward and answered with a clear tone.

"I understand your feelings, Sensei. I understand them all too well."

Kuriu-sensei glared at Chigusa upon hearing those words. *As if you understand! As if you get how I feel! I can't stand anyone who would say that so lightly!* Her gaze was resentful, even murderous.

And yet Chigusa looked her straight in the eyes. Her malicious attitude from before was gone, replaced by genuine earnestness. She chose her words carefully. "The world is narrow-minded. It is arrogant. It is cruel. The world does not acknowledge people who do not act according to its point of view."

Kuriu-sensei's expression became perplexed at Chigusa's roundabout words. Yet after spinning those eloquent words, Chigusa had long since stopped expecting a reply.

"The world is not kind to us. It laughs at us, sneers at us, denies us. It dunks us into the coal tar and the bottom of the sea. In this

world, we, who deviate only slightly from the conventions of others, are utterly alone."

That was the truth of the world as Chigusa saw it.

The world is narrow-minded.

It doesn't allow the existence of subjectivity and only forces objectivity down one's throat. Everyone says it: "You should see things more objectively", "Grow up already" and "Think about the feelings of others."

It doesn't acknowledge errors, irregularities and particularisms; it just calls the majority of subjective opinions the objective stance. Those who reject it are excluded, rejected and persecuted, and thus the world preserves the existence of objectivity to this day. The exceptionally talented and the standout beauties are a destructive force. Without any sense of fairness, they make themselves known and crush the existing peace.

That's why the world rejects them. By revering an existence higher than themselves, they fall outside the circle of humanity.

By humiliating and looking down upon a type of evil far inferior to themselves, the world feels gratified. By resigning all hope of mutual understanding, the world accepts others.

And thus, more than anyone else, the heretical Chigusa was a martyr in this world.

"There is not much that we, who have been rejected by the world, can do for you." Chigusa cut off her words there and looked over her shoulder at me.

For a while, Chigusa and I looked at each other's faces in silence and nodded. Together, we opened our mouths and spun a story

about the future of the world. About the world that I'm sure Chigusa and I had chosen for ourselves from here on out.

We opened our mouths in unison.

"When that's the way the world is, the only thing you can do is agree to disagree."

"When that's the way the world is, the only thing you can do is burn it to the ground."

That last part went completely off-track.

"What made you reach that conclusion…?" I gave Chigusa a nonplussed look.

"W-Well, you see, I am usually correct. So the world must be wrong…" she explained in a flustered tone.

It was genuinely cute to see her cheeks redden slightly as she waved her hands, but unfortunately, that wasn't much of an explanation.

As she watched us bantering, Kuriu-sensei cracked a smile for the first time in quite a long while. She burst out laughing so hard that she clutched her stomach, unable to hold it in.

Perhaps in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, Chigusa coughed repeatedly and opened her mouth. "W-Well, it's true that this is a worthless world, but… it's not something to cast away. If you can shut your eyes to… well, let's not go there, someone close by may unexpectedly come to your aid."

Chigusa was peering at me surreptitiously. I gave a light nod back in her direction.

Geez. Chigusa closed her eyes to the parts of my appearance that were… well, let's not go there. I, in turn, opened my eyes solely to Chigusa's surface appearances. There was no need for us to make up for each other's deficiencies. We just reached out for the things we pined for and pushed our own egocentric buttons.

"You're right… You might not match, but it really was for the best…" said Kuriu-sensei as she dabbed her eyelids.

Haruma

There's not much to say about what happened next.

Shia-chan and the others were living blissfully in the aforementioned mystery room, just as Sensei testified. To be honest, even though it seemed without doubt that Kuriu-sensei was a deviant who loved young girls, she was a good deviant as far as deviants went, and the girls she had confined in luxury were in tiptop condition. In fact, some of them had been aware from the very beginning that they had been living in relatively luxurious confinement.

The only problem those girls suffered was that they didn't get to keep the underwear they had brought over.

Furthermore, those pieces of underwear were stashed inside a mysterious, huge safe along with detailed profiles of the confined girls, cash and precious jewels.

"According to the ancients, one must render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Let's return these things to where they belong…"

Chigusa's wallet was bulging. Man, this girl was the absolute worst.

Just as we had finished inspecting almost all the panties we had discovered, Chigusa called out to Kuriu-sensei. "By the way, it appears that Maria-san, who slapped me on Wednesday the week before last, does not have a profile."

"What's with the pointlessly specific memory…? A hard disk recorder doesn't save anything from the week before last."

"Haruma-san, just what anime are you watching every week…?"

Why did she narrow it down to just anime? It was true enough, though. I grumbled, but Chigusa suddenly lost interest in me and turned to Kuriu-sensei instead.

"So what happened to Maria-san?" she asked.

Kuriu-sensei cocked her head, mystified.

"Maria-san? Is Maria-san missing as well?"

And they fathered them together into the place
which is called in Hebrew Har-magedon.
And there were lightnings, and voices, and thunders;
and there was a great earthquake,
such as was not since there were men upon the earth,
so great an earthquake, so mighty.
And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell:
and Babylon the great was remembered in the sight of God,
to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath.
And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found.
And great hail, every stone about the weight of a talent,
cometh down out of heaven upon men:
and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail;
for the plague thereof is exceeding great.

Revelation to John (Johannes) 16: 16; 18-21, ASV

Epilogue Part 1

Yuu

Sunday morning in the middle of the rainy season was covered with clear blue skies.

No matter where I looked, there was not a single cloud to be a seen. The sky was blue as far as the eye could see, and the weather was so utterly fine that it felt distinctly unreal. It was almost like background art for a kabuki play. The stage curtains had already fallen, and all that was left was to wait for someone to tidy up the storehouse.

Somehow, it made my skin crawl.

Regardless of my actions, the play would invariably end on its own accord. Even if I were to continue living in my own world, others with their subjective opinions would interfere. That was the sort of feeling I experienced.

What lies ahead of us is sweet despair.

The harsh extinction of one's consciousness. A nightmare that stretches into eternity. A snare that reaches into the void.

Every day we live, we edge one step closer to death. There is no guarantee that one will live to see tomorrow.

People do not have enough time to spare in their lives to waste it on conflict or intruding upon the stories of others. They may invent feelings and concoct encounters, but in the end it is all about themselves. Instead of paying any heed whatsoever to the person they misunderstood, they focus solely on their own story. Instead of paying any heed whatsoever to a person they care little for, they simply focus on living their lives on their own terms.

And then they pray. They pray so that when death finally claims them they will have a smile on their faces—

"… How bright," I muttered, pulling down the blinds.

As I closed my eyes, the bell rang at the doorway.

Yuu

Haruma-san took his usual seat at the edge of the sofa in the living room faster than I could set down the barley tea.

By now, he had become quite a savvy individual. At first he was a hopeless mutt who could not even remember where the toilet was, but the training paid off. How impressive I am. I am such a wonderful breeder that I could now take him out anywhere without being ashamed.

I sat down on the opposite end of the sofa and nodded eagerly.

Normally, it was a Chigusa family trend to have Misa sitting in the middle, but today Kusaoka-san had been with me to observe the health institution since morning.

Misa had firmly rejected our offer to attend to her in bed, saying that it was her final checkup at this place we had frequented countless times. She seemed to have been growing more independent lately. I wondered if she was growing in places I could not see. There was also a possibility that she had absolutely no desire to see Haruma-san. I'd say the probability of the latter was 60 per cent.

"I've looked them both over." Haruma-san spread out a bunch of the documents on the sofa and held them out towards me. "As it turns out, your list of missing clients and Kuriu-sensei's underwear collection list don't match one bit."

"This is a bit off-topic but, but it's quite amusing to hear you say underwear collection with that face of yours."

"I'm not amused. That really is off-topic."

Haruma-san's face (which was… well, let's not got there) screwed up in mock-anger, which made me giggle. He clucked his tongue at me like a child. *Tch!* Somehow, it just left me more amused. I might have become addicted to laughter.

"I looked all over Sensei's house, but Maria-chan's still missing," he said. "Her preferences aside, Kuriu-sensei's feelings of love seem to be genuine, so I don't think she was lying about anything she said…"

"Not to mention that there's a discrepancy in the urban legend, hm?"

Kuriu-sensei had only said she had spread a rumour about young girls going out into town at night. But what we had actually heard was that lovers vanished at a crossroads, a strange rumour that strained credibility. One might assume that the rumour had changed as it was being spread, but still.

"Hey, I've been telling you this whole time that I actually saw it happen with my own eyes."

"I don't believe a word of it so it doesn't matter to me."

"Don't give me that. Have some faith in me."

I would never fall for any sinister plot to deceive another person. Haruma-san had probably concocted some story out of his simple desire to be with me. Beauty is such a curse. Those who are so far beneath me must approach me in such a roundabout way.

"Great, this is getting nowhere… If only I had a handy girlfriend, I could've gotten sucked into the crossroad and seen what it's really like for myself…"

Haruma-san looked for all the world as if he could not think of anything, so I sighed for no discernible reason or purpose.

"…Good grief. You leave me with no choice."

I uttered the magic words (i.e. the lines I was *supposed* to say). With a nonchalant expression, I lifted a single finger, wielding those well-worn words as a weapon.

"If you want to test that urban legend, then perhaps I can be of help, no?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Why, you ask? Because we love each other!"

Haruma-san blinked—once, twice—and then nodded as if he was satisfied about something.

"That's right." He paused. "Er, is that right? Really?" Another pause. "Okay. Yeah, um, sure."

"Huh? Er, um, yes…"

"Huh? What? You mean that's not how it is after all?"

"No, um, that is what I meant…"

Haruma-san always carried himself with an air of baseness and irony, so I would never have considered that he would respond with candour. The arrogant manner with which he responded to a perfect girl's joke about their class differences had the same gravity as that of a sinner, as described in the Book of Johanne. My cheeks instantly turned red as a kettle as my anger flared, so I pressed my cup against my ear and blew to cool myself down. No no, there was no point even if I blew with my mouth, man. Hm, why did I say 'man'? Was it because I had a hairy, red face? My shaking and trembling were leaving a lasting effect. And the cause of it was entirely my anger. Most definitely anger.

Calm thyself, Yuu.

I sipped on my barley tea and gazed vacantly up at the second floor.

"That reminds me, Misa isn't here today. Perhaps she's staying overnight."

"Hmm…" Haruma-san had gulped down his barley tea and was staring at the bottom of his cup for some reason. "Oh yeah, Amane-chan said she's coming home late too."

"…Hmm," I grunted as I counted the number of moths on the ceiling and pretended to act enthused.

A fairy of silence danced within the living room. I'm quite sure that fairy was wearing an extraordinarily spiteful expression. My back started itching excessively, and my body started trembling with impatience. My neck was thoroughly strained from looking up at the ceiling, but I had no idea what sort of expression I should wear on my face if I did look down.

There are many things in this world that defy understanding.

Let me see, which one of us was the reason why my hand on the sofa had become heavier at this very moment? Who had approached first? I would firmly insist that it was the impertinent Haruma-san.

If that is what I think, then it must be so. That's how it is in my world.

Haruma

In this world created through my own thoughts, there were many things that I knew I ought not to do (although if that were the case, it was generally a mystery why I called it my world), but anyway, this was the only time I could not understand why things had turned out the way they did.

No, I did my part. I tried my best to understand, and I even acted. But no matter how much everyone tried to challenge the

system like a green, droopy-eyed monster, it wasn't as if they were going to succeed. It all led to nothing in the end.

I threw myself down on an unfamiliar bed and opened my eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling.

The wind blew in through the open window, gently cooling my sweaty skin. I let out a feverish sigh and tossed around in the bed.

Through a gap in the fluttering curtains, the yellow light of the evening sun shone through.

The faint sunlight illuminated her black hair spread languidly across the wrinkled bed sheets, her white porcelain skin, and finally the smile of the girl in my arms.

Chigusa was lying on her stomach wrapped in bed sheets that served as a towel blanket, her face buried in a pillow. Her shoulders and legs were bared, and I could catch a slight glimpse of her cleavage. Looking at her like this was like a dream; it didn't feel real. Or you could say it felt like the kind of thing I dream about during the day.

There are a lot of things in this world that defy understanding. Time to face the situation and unravel the first mystery.

"Um, can I just ask one thing?"

"What is it, Haruma-san?"

"…Are you really okay with it? With, um… me," I rasped, my voice ever so slightly husky and pitiful.

In response, Chigusa held a finger to my lips. Then she edged closer to me with a bashful laugh. *Heh heh.* Our bare shoulders bumped, causing our light sweat to mix like champagne.

"I'm okay with it. I really am okay with it. I mean, even if you do make a small mistake, it's nothing to be worried over, Clumsyoka-san!"

"…That's not what I meant. Oh, and that's a fine thing for you to say. I'm so sorry, Chibusa-san."

The moment I said that, she slapped my cheek. *Thwack!*

"Ouuuuch! Um, what? Did you just through a serious punch at me?!"

"I am always serious."

Chigusa made a pouty face oh-so-innocently. She peeled off the sheets around her chest, and then, with a short, breathy sigh, she began to speak as if singing a beautiful song.

"That's why I am serious when I say that I'm glad that you're here beside me now, Clumsyoka-san."

"Oh, right…"

If she put it that way, then there was no way that I could object.

After another silence, I spoke up again. "I'm glad then, Chibusa-san."

That was supposed to be a cute put-down to hide my embarrassment, but it earned me another hard slap, this time on the left cheek. Ouuuch! Man, was she that hung about up her chest? Sorry, I didn't really care about it either way…

At least, that's why I thought she hit me, but this time her reason was something different.

"You have to call me by my name. Do it properly," said Chigusa as she averted her face and tossed around in the bed with her back facing me.

"Chigusa?"

There was no response when I called out her. I tried to get her attention countless times but she persisted in ignoring me huffily.

—Which meant that, if I was ever going to say it, now was the time.

"Yuu."

When I called out her name, Yuu rose from the bed. Her fingers fell on my skin, and her whispers tickled my ear.

"Only someone special can call me by my first name. I am worth a high premium. Will you pay me with the rest of your life?"

"…The rest of my life? That's not a good deal."

This time, she slapped me on both cheeks as if she was attempting to squeeze me. *I said it hurts,* I would have said, but the complaints never formed in my mouth. Yuu simply held me to the spot, so that all I could see in front of me was her face.

As our bodies drew together, the bed shook wildly as if a giant whale was tumbling around in it. The creaking never went away; the wobbling gave off a precarious feeling.

There was no firm foothold, so it wasn't like I was looking for one. We brought our faces together on our accord, simply because we wanted to.

Just as our lips touched, Yuu let out a soft sigh. "Ah."

Her wide eyes were directed behind me outside the window. When I looked over my shoulder to follow her gaze, she pulled my head towards her.

My world, and my world alone, was coming to an end.

A black shadow engulfed the world. Her flowing, jet-black hair released a shining light.

It happened suddenly, taking me off guard.

We kissed, signalling the end of the story.

Afterword-1

I first met the light novel author known as Sagara Sou a few years ago. If I recall correctly, it was around the time when the first volume of *Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come wa Machigatteiru* (published by the GAGAGA imprint of Shogakukan) was being sold. Back then, the first thing he said to me was: "I read your blog all the time!" That's not what people usually say to a novelist, and I distinctly remember thinking: "What's up with this guy…?" I also distinctly remember badmouthing him on my blog afterwards. If someone had told me back then that I'd be writing a book with this guy, there was no way I would have believed them.

Then, through some chain of events, we ended up talking on familiar terms: "Whoa, you write so well! You make me want to work harder! (Why'd you have to make *that* happen to *those* characters? I'll punch your lights out, you bastard. How could you do this to me? You'd better remember this. I'll make sure you taste the pain as well.)" And somehow we ended up writing a book.

I regret it now.

Afterword-2

I first met the author known as Watari Wataru at around the 20th of March 2011. It was straight after he wrote a blog post about how it's a trend these days to open a conversation with: "I read your blog all the time!" When I handed him my business card, the very first thing that came out of my mouth was: "A newcomer author like you wouldn't know anything about me, huh?" I distinctly remember him snorting at me. As an ardent fan, I had only tried to open the conversation with a rehash of

one of his jokes, so when he wrote a post badmouthing me that night, I was so hurt I could have died. It was the kind of bullying an ardent newcomer receives from their senpai.

As you can see, what I am trying to say is that there were often conflicts between our personal viewpoints. My world revolves entirely around my own perspective. His world revolves entirely around his perspective.

I think that this story, which was born from our chat in that speakeasy, no doubt revolves around that kind of theme, and that from its humble beginnings in our world it has evolved in all sorts of directions.

Afterword-3

Now for the acknowledgments.

To Saboten-sama: Your wonderful illustrations brought moisture to the desolate Tokyo desert that was this story! Thank you very much.

To our editor Yamamoto-sama: Seeee, this time we managed with time to spare. Bwahaha! …We're sorry. You really helped us out! Thank you very much.

To Tachibana Koushi-sama, who gave us some huge inspiration for the main scenario: Thanks, man!

And finally, to all our readers: The information about this group of projects is still coming out in bits and pieces, so please give us your support! Thank you very much!

Our battle has only just begin, we think.

Sagara Sou / Watari Wataru

To be continued…

Haruma

Her wide eyes were directed at the window behind me.

"Oh my, what is that…?" Yuu murmured as she stared at the unfolding scenery outside.

When I looked over my shoulder to follow her gaze, the setting sun was far redder than usual, and the sky was burning bright red as if a pillar of fire had engulfed the city.

That stardust-studded light appeared to me like millions of gold coins falling from the sky.

Yuu

We left the house and walked along at a creeping pace.

There was not a soul to be seen around us. There were only bent telephone poles and hellish flames springing from the ground, as if seething with impatience. If all life on Earth were suddenly wiped out, I am fairly certain that it would look like this.

Gazing up at the heavens, the evening sun burned bright red as if it was madly, passionately in love, and the red moon dripped with fresh blood. It was as if the two were putting on a joint performance to paint the scene of the end of the world in all of its brilliance.

And yet, there were things both visible and invisible to the human eye that indicated that the world had certainly come to its end. As far as we who lived only in our subjective bubbles were concerned, it was impossible to distinguish between how the world was established and how it would liquidate.

We, who had been oppressed by this narrow-minded world, had no obligation to spare a thought for how the world would end. It was only important to us that we were living in the moment, that we were holding hands, that we walked in step with each other.

"Was this where the Random Crossroad started?" he mused.

"Who knows? Which path shall we take?"

"Let's go with right, then."

"In that case, I'll choose left."

"We'll take the middle path and go straight ahead."

We smiled and huddled closer, before walking down the path towards the urban legend.

And thus we arrived at the place where it all began.

Haruma

We stood with our shoulders hunched together, battered by the wind.

"…What a nice scene."

This place, which should have been so familiar, now appeared to us as a scene of the world at its very brink. If I had been looking at this sunset glow alone, I would not have seen so much worth in it.

If one could visualise the end of the world, then I imagine it would be a tranquil sight like this. As if gods were falling from the sky through some mechanical manoeuvre, or how the most beautiful women you've ever seen plunged from the sky in flames. I was fond of the latter in particular.

I'm sure that if all the variety were to die out on this planet and individuality ceased to be, this girl would not be any less beautiful to me, I thought as I looked at the falling sky and then at her. That caused her to giggle.

"Have you fallen in love with me all over again? I believe you fell in love with me at first sight, Haruma-san."

"Well, at first. Then I realised what a bitch you were, and I still thought you were a bitch in the middle of the story, and now I think that even though you're a bitch, I ended up getting used to it. And so, well, yeah. It was love at first sight."

"I wouldn't call that love at first sight…"

"Pretty sure I said I fell for you in the beginning."

"You didn't. Do you hear me? I'm saying that love at first sight is more like, well, you want to be with the other person from the moment you first meet, you resort to desperate means to go out with that person, you get angry at the most inconsequential things, and you do all sorts of incomprehensible things."

"That's specific," I said.

She puffed out her chest proudly. "I'm a specialist, you see." She chuckled. "Haruma-san, you're the exact opposite, I see."

Her hand touched mine. Our fingers intertwined in an awkward, irregular manner.

We bumped against each other, fumbled against each other, yielded to each other, opened up to each other, and finally we became one.

That's how we fell in love.

(fin)